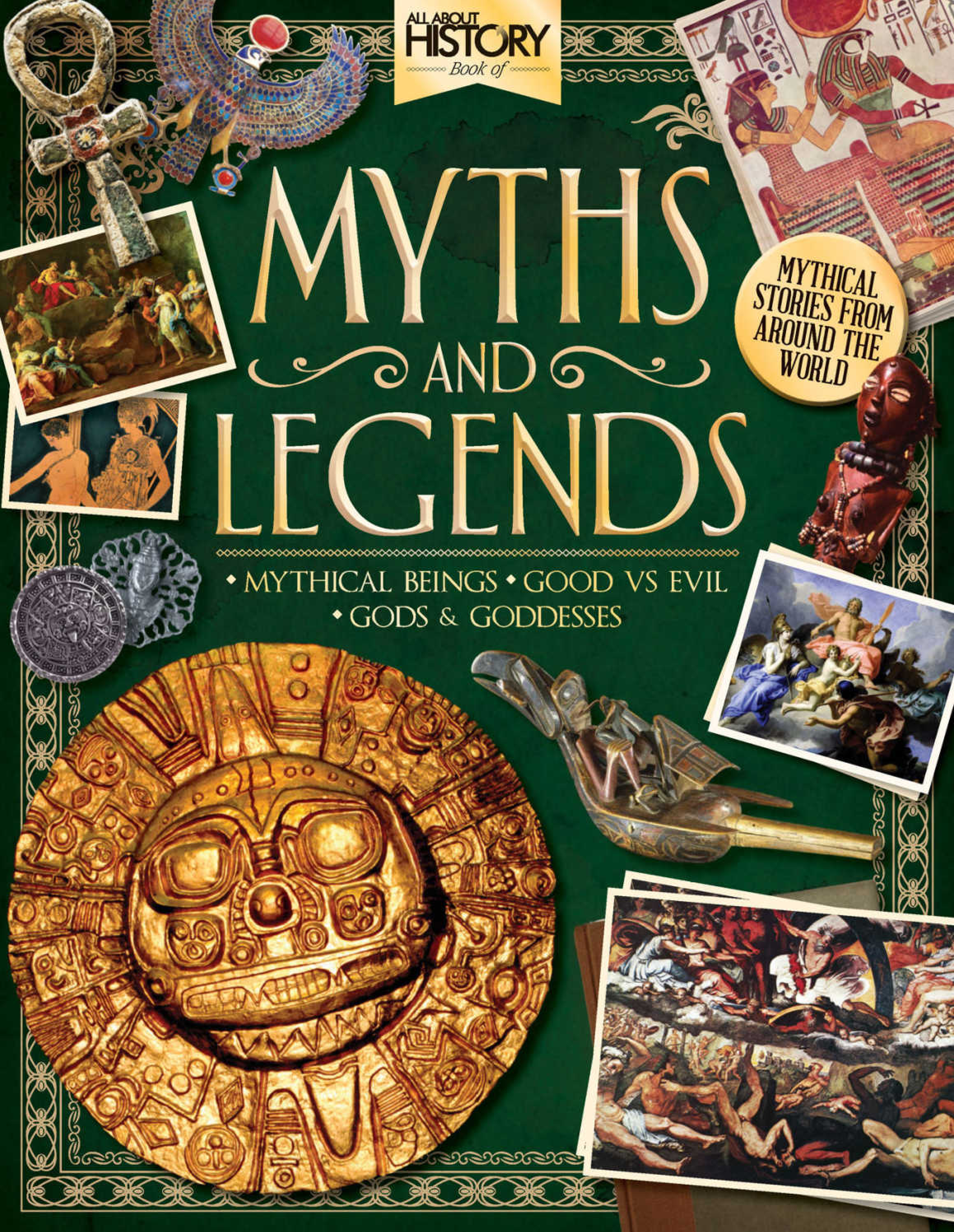

ALL ABOUT HISTORY
Book of

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

- MYTHICAL BEINGS
- GOOD VS EVIL
- GODS & GODDESSES

MYTHICAL STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

ALL ABOUT HISTORY

Book of

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Explore the world's great myths and legends, brought to life in this enthralling retelling of age-old stories passed down from generation to generation. Unravel the meaning and context behind the myths, understand their cultural significance, and discover the characters and themes. From heroes of ancient Greece to the dreaming or Australian aborigines, here are the myths that, thousands of years after they were first told, are still relevant today.

ALL ABOUT HISTORY
Book of

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

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INTRODUCTION

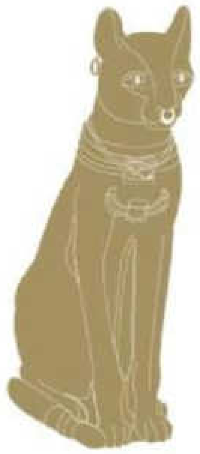
Myths – stories of gods, heroes, and great cosmic events – are told in all of the world's many cultures. They deal with the deepest, most fundamental issues: the creation of the universe and of the human race, the nature of the gods and spirits, what happens to us when we die, and how the world will end. They examine love and jealousy, war and peace, good and evil. Myths explore these crucial issues with intriguing plots, vivid characters, memorable scenes, and concepts that touch our deepest emotions; and so they have become eternally fascinating.

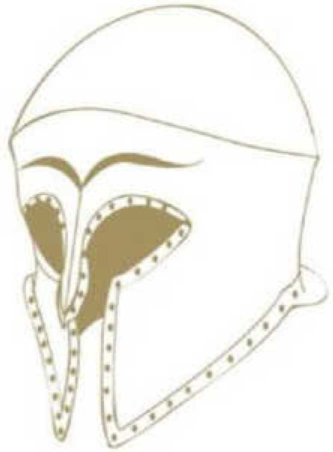
Myths began as tales told around the fire by successive generations, and in some places they are still passed on orally. Later, with the invention of writing, people began to write their myths down and adapt them in new ways – turning them into plays, poems, or novels, for example. Some of the world's greatest literature, from the Greek epics of Homer to the sagas of the early Icelandic writers, are based on much older myths that were originally told orally.

MYRIAD MYTHS

Because of their oral roots, myths are not set in stone. Each one, endlessly retold, has spawned variations. Often, there is no single "correct" version of a myth. The name of a god will change from one tribe to the next; a twist in a tale will be explained in different ways by neighbouring groups. Written versions of a myth multiply the retellings still further.

This book can tell only a fraction of the world's myths, and usually gives only one version of each story. But it does contain a generous selection of myths from around the globe, including many from the cultures of





SOME CULTURES HAVE THOUSANDS OF DEITIES, SO THE SCOPE FOR VARIATIONS IN THEIR MYTHS IS ALMOST INFINITE.

Europe that, because they have been written down and widely circulated, have had an enormous influence across the world.

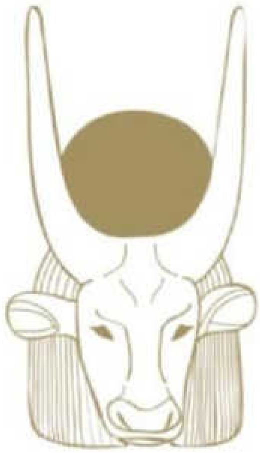
COSMOS AND PEOPLE

Among the seemingly endless variety of myths are common themes. Nearly every mythology starts with the question: “How did the universe begin?” Often, a shadowy creator takes the first step; a god, perhaps, who wills himself into being. Frequently, the creator is faced with a cosmic egg. In one variation of the Chinese creation myth, for instance, the god Pan Gu has to break such an egg to form the land and sky. Sometimes the creator has to fetch land from the depths of a primal ocean – like the Earth Diver, a common figure in Native American myths. In other myths the world is the offspring of a male and a female creator.

Often, people come much later. Usually they are moulded from clay or carved from wood. Like human sculptors, the gods often make several false starts. Myths from Mexico to Greece tell of three versions of people, only the last being right. Sometimes the first people are male, and when they begin to die the gods make women so that the people can reproduce.

GODS AND THEIR POWERS

Most cultures have a large number of gods or spirits – sometimes thousands, because there are spirits everywhere. In places as far apart as



FOR EARLY PEOPLES, THE EXISTENCE OF DEITIES EXPLAINED WHY THE SUN SHONE AND WHERE THE RAINS CAME FROM.

Japan and Africa, every rock, stream, lake, and hill may have its own spirit. Many are local deities, worshipped mainly by the people who live nearby and share their sacred space.

Yet even in cultures that have thousands of deities there are core groups of widely known gods with special powers. There are gods of the sun, the rain, the sea, the sky, the mountains, and the rivers. Specific gods look after hunting, farming, love, childbirth, war, and death. The myths involving these gods tend to relate closely to their roles.

Many myths involve mortals with extraordinary superhuman powers. These heroes accomplish apparently impossible tasks, win battles single-handedly, and even visit the Underworld. They may also be culture heroes, who teach people important skills such as fire-making. Their achievements are often so great that they become gods when they die.

MYTHS OF THE ELEMENTS

Among the most prominent gods are those of the elements, notably the sun and the rain. They determine whether crops grow, so the sun and weather gods are often the most widely worshipped of all the gods. From the Inca sun god Inti to the Greek sky god Zeus, they are supremely powerful.

Some of the most familiar mythical themes concern the elements. Many cultures have a myth in which the sun disappears, depriving

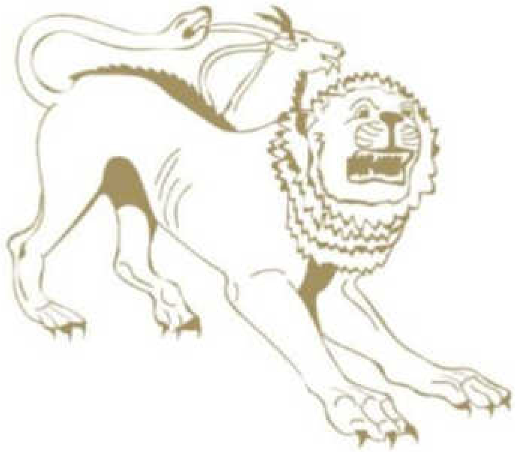
the world of food and warmth and explaining night and day. Other cultures, such as China and parts of Africa, have a myth in which there is too much sunlight, which the gods reduce, or counter with night. Worldwide, wrathful gods send great floods, sometimes wiping out all but one human family before normality is restored. Stories like these explain natural disasters and encourage people to honour the gods, so that they will not unleash their anger; they are also gripping tales of adventure and rescue.

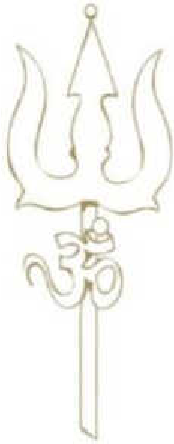
THE IMPORTANCE OF MYTHS

Myths reinforce the cultural identity of the people who tell them. For the Aborigines of Australia, the origin myths of each tribe tell not only of the ancestors, but of the routes they took across the land when they brought each natural feature into being: the land, its people, and their myths are united inextricably. Myths were just as important to the ancient Greeks, who named their greatest city, Athens, after its patron goddess, Athena; to the Incas, who believed their rulers to be descended from the sun god himself; and to the Norse, whose warriors tried to emulate their great god Odin.

The vitality and importance of myths is seen not only in their countless retellings, but in the way their gods, heroes, and creatures have inspired artists. From China to ancient Rome, artists have painted and carved images of the gods, an activity that is sometimes itself an act of worship, sometimes more simply a celebration of the deities and their deeds.

Myths arise from an intimate relationship between people and the natural and spirit worlds – something so many of us have lost. They operate on the borders between reality and fantasy, celebrate oddity and uncertainty, and describe terrifying cosmic forces. But they also deal with great excitement and inspiration. Myths are the most enthralling stories we have, because they touch our hearts and minds and reach to the very core of our being.





EUROPE

Compared with the vast land areas of the continents of Africa and Asia, Europe is relatively small; nevertheless, it does have a long cultural history. Part of the legacy of this heritage is a body of myth that contains many thousands of different legends, split into a number of very distinct traditions across the continent. These range from the stories told by the Slavs of Eastern Europe to the myths related by the Norsemen of Western Europe, and from the complex pantheon of ancient Greece and Rome to the chivalric stories of the Middle Ages. Most of these traditions have become well known all around the world because of Europe's long history of written culture.

But the myths and legends of Europe, like those of all other parts of the world, originated long before the invention of the written word. Some evidence of these prehistoric traditions survives, but it is often minimal. The Romans, for example, wrote about some of the gods and goddesses of the pre-literate Celts whose territories they overran, but their descriptions of Celtic deities and religious practices are patchy. Even when put together with the archaeological evidence of inscriptions, statues, altars, jewellery, and other paraphernalia, they form only a partial picture.

Other aspects of European mythology have come down to us through popular stories from oral traditions – stories that were not recorded by writers and folklorists until much later, some not until the 19th century. Many of the gods and stories from Central and Eastern Europe have survived in this way, and have been given new life when they have inspired writers, painters, and composers to re-imagine them in new works. Stories from Russian mythology, for example, have given rise to paintings by such well-known illustrators and stage designers as Ivan Bilibin, and music by famous composers such as Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky.

> MEN CREATE THE GODS IN THEIR OWN IMAGE.
>
> The Greek philosopher Xenophanes (570–480 BCE)

However, the most familiar European myths have come down to us through literature. Myths originating in ancient Greece – of the gods of Mount Olympus, of heroes, and of many semi-divine beings – were given long life by the Greeks' later poets and dramatists. Fascinating in their own right, stories of gods such as Zeus and Apollo, and of heroes such as Heracles and Perseus, have been made still more enduring and popular because they became the subject matter for, among other Greek writers, Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, and Euripides. When the Romans adopted the myths of the Greeks, a new generation of writers, such as Ovid and Virgil, developed these stories even further. Another example of a rich literary culture embracing mythology that had roots in a much earlier period is found in the works of the poets and writers of the Middle Ages, who retold stories of King Arthur and his knights, as well as other tales of chivalry.

The literary retellings of European myth remind us of the sophistication of the societies that produced them, from ancient Greece to medieval Christendom. Yet this sophistication is only one side of the myths, because the world of European mythology is often very far from sophisticated. Extraordinarily bloody battles, bodies torn limb from limb, gods who behave with little or no concern at all for morality – all of these are regular features of Classical Greek and Roman myth, for example. And the witches, ogres, water sprites, werewolves, and other dark beings that loom large in many of the stories from Central Europe can be just as violent and fearsome. For all of its great age and apparent sophistication, then, the mythology of Europe remains as ambiguous and edgy as it ever was.

COSMIC WAR

The gods of Mount Olympus, who are the dominant characters in most of the myths of ancient Greece, took control of the universe by fighting a long war with their ancestors and rivals, the Titans. The story of this Cosmic War, which is also known as the Titanomachia, involves many themes – such as oracles, lost children, and revenge – that are prominent in later myths. At the end of the struggle, Zeus emerged as the supreme ruler of the entire cosmos, and the defeated Titans were banished to the Underworld.

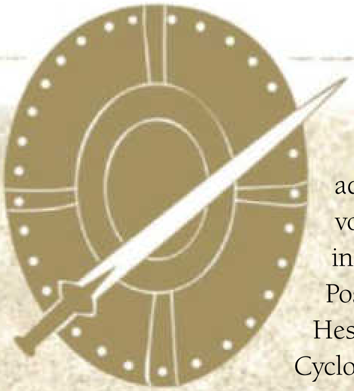
THE MYTH

An oracle had told the Titan Cronus that one of his children would kill him. As a result, whenever a child was born to his wife, Rhea, Cronus would swallow it. After Cronus had disposed of five children, Rhea hatched a plan. When their next child, Zeus, was born, she sent him to Crete, where Amalthea, a friendly goat-nymph, brought up the child. Meanwhile, Rhea wrapped a stone in swaddling clothes and gave it to Cronus to swallow.

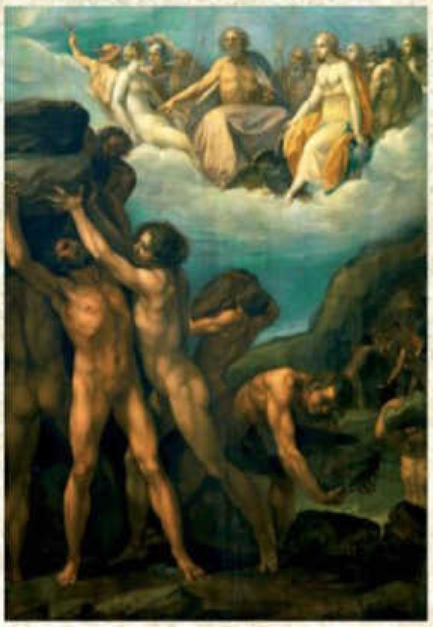
THE RETURN OF ZEUS

After Zeus grew up, one day his foster-mother, Amalthea, revealed his true identity to him and narrated how Cronus had swallowed all his siblings. An enraged Zeus then resolved to take revenge on his father for this crime. When he declared his intention to the Titaness Metis, she told him that he could still rescue his brothers and sisters. She gave him a drug that, when it was administered to Cronus, would make him vomit up all his children. Zeus followed Metis's instructions and rescued his siblings – the gods Poseidon and Hades, and the goddesses Hera, Hestia, and Demeter. Then Zeus freed the Cyclopes, the one-eyed giants whom Uranus had banished to the Underworld. The gods and the Cyclopes led by Zeus declared war on Cronus.

The two sides were equally matched and the conflict seemed destined to last forever. But the Cyclopes were master metalworkers, and they created a number of magical weapons, including a thunderbolt for Zeus, a trident for Poseidon, and a helmet for Hades that made the wearer invisible. These eventually gave the gods the upper hand in the conflict. At the end of the war, the gods controlled the cosmos and the Titans were imprisoned in Tartarus, a region in the Underworld full of fearsome monsters guarded by the Hundred-Handed Giants.



▲ **Bronze shield and sword**
The Greeks used to make fine bronze weapons. Myths about metalworkers like the Cyclopes show how vital these skills were to them.



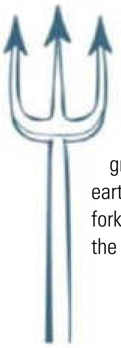
◄ **In battle**
Hurling heavy rocks was one way in which the gods and giants attacked each other. This painting shows a scene from the Gigantomachia, the battle between the gods and Gaia's children, the giants.

FURTHER BATTLES

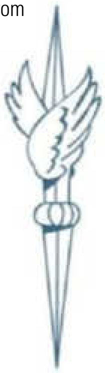
Gaia, outraged that her children had been dispatched to Tartarus, began another war against the gods, bringing the Giants, who were also her children, into battle against Zeus and the other gods and goddesses. The gods were finally the victors in this battle, known as the Gigantomachia, and the Giants were buried beneath volcanoes. But even then their rule was not secure. Zeus was challenged one last time by Typhon, yet another of Gaia's offspring. Although Zeus injured Typhon – a huge creature with many heads and countless legs and arms – with his thunderbolt, the monster continued to hurl enormous rocks at him. Zeus retaliated by attacking the rocks with thunderbolts, so that they rebounded on Typhon, knocking the strength out of him. Finally, Zeus hurled him down to Tartarus. His rule was secure at last.

WEAPONS OF THE GODS

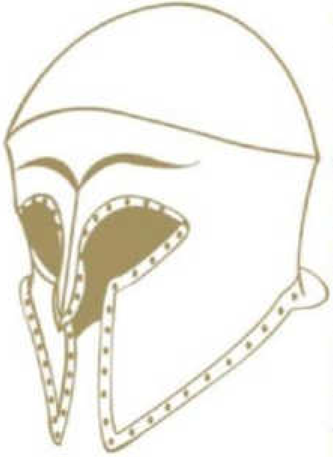
The deities of ancient Greece resembled humans in several ways. When the gods fought a war, the Greeks imagined them as beings in human form, fighting with weapons. These weapons were made for them by Hephaestus, the god of metalworking, craftsmanship, and fire, who was a kind of celestial blacksmith. But the weapons of the gods had powers that went far beyond earthly swords and daggers. When Zeus wielded his thunderbolt or Poseidon struck his trident, the entire cosmos shook. Hephaestus sometimes made armour for mortal heroes like Achilles, and when a hero showed special prowess in arms, people said his weaponry must have been made by Hephaestus.



Trident
Poseidon's weapon was the trident, which he used to stir up storms, to shake the ground – thereby causing earthquakes – and even to fork up new islands from the sea bed.



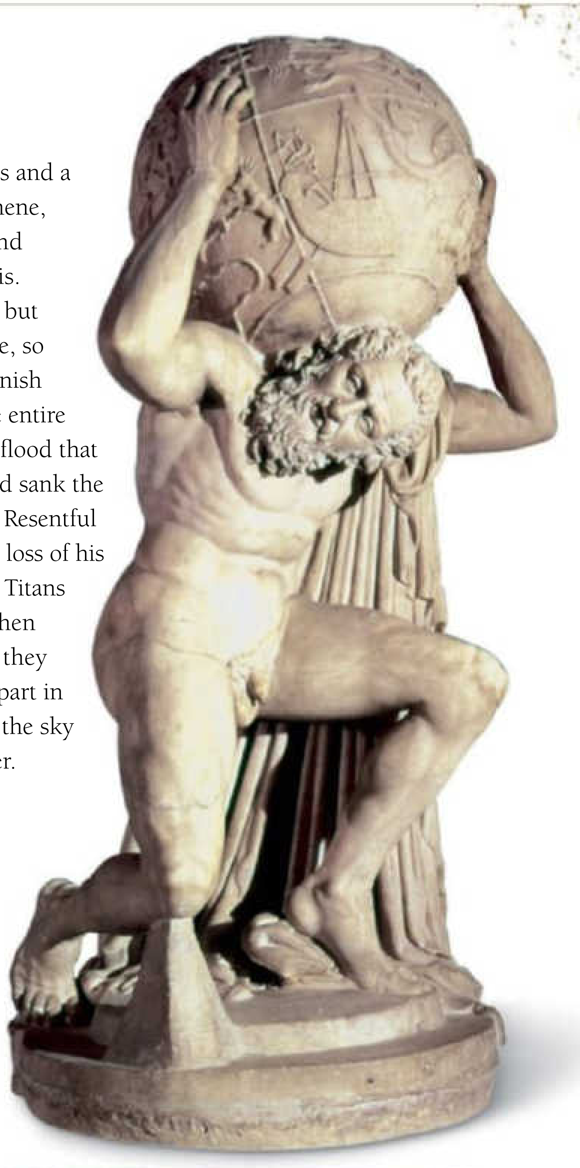
Thunderbolt
Zeus used a thunderbolt as his weapon. As well as making the whole sky shake with its power, he could aim it with precision, either to kill an opponent or to shatter his opponent's weapon.



Helmet
Hades's helmet made him invisible, so that he could attack his enemies without being detected. Because he ruled the dark realms of the Underworld, Hades was never depicted in ancient Greek art.

ATLAS

Son of the Titan Iapetus and a sea nymph called Clymene, Atlas ruled a large island kingdom called Atlantis. He had many subjects, but they became degenerate, so the gods decided to punish them by destroying the entire race. They sent a great flood that killed all the people and sank the island beneath the sea. Resentful towards the gods at the loss of his kingdom, Atlas led the Titans in the Cosmic War. When the gods won the war, they punished Atlas for his part in it by making him hold the sky on his shoulders forever.

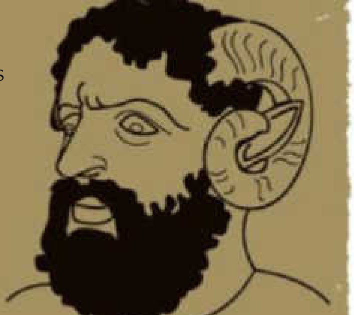


Bearer of the skies
The celestial globe held by Atlas was sometimes mistaken for the Earth, leading both to the belief that he held the world on his shoulders, and to the use of Atlas's name for books of maps.

* * *

DISGUISES OF THE GODS

One enduring theme in Greek mythology is the way in which the gods could disguise themselves. Deities used their shape-changing ability to serve different purposes – from fighting battles to pursuing loved ones. When they were challenged by the monster Typhon, all the deities except the brave Athena fled to Egypt, where they disguised themselves as different creatures and went into hiding. However, Zeus eventually forsook his disguise and came forth to fight the monster.



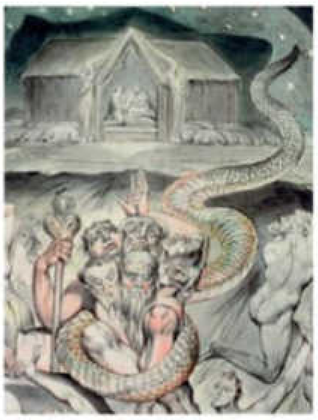
The ram
The normally brave Zeus disguised himself as a ram, a creature that was aggressive and impressively armed with a pair of horns.

The crow
While hiding, Apollo took the form of a crow, a rather unassuming disguise considering that he was the god of music.

The cat
Artemis, who was a huntress and the goddess of the chase, chose to transform herself into a cat, also a hunting creature.

TYPHON AND THE WINDS

Gaia bore the fire-breathing monster Typhon, who was the god of winds, with the intention of creating a son so powerful that he could defeat the gods. Some accounts say that after Zeus overcame him, he was condemned to the Underworld. Other versions of the story relate how he survived and went to live on Mount Olympus. There he made peace with the gods, occasionally giving birth to mighty storms called typhoons. Certain myths also claim he dwelled in Mount Etna where he spewed out smoke and lava.



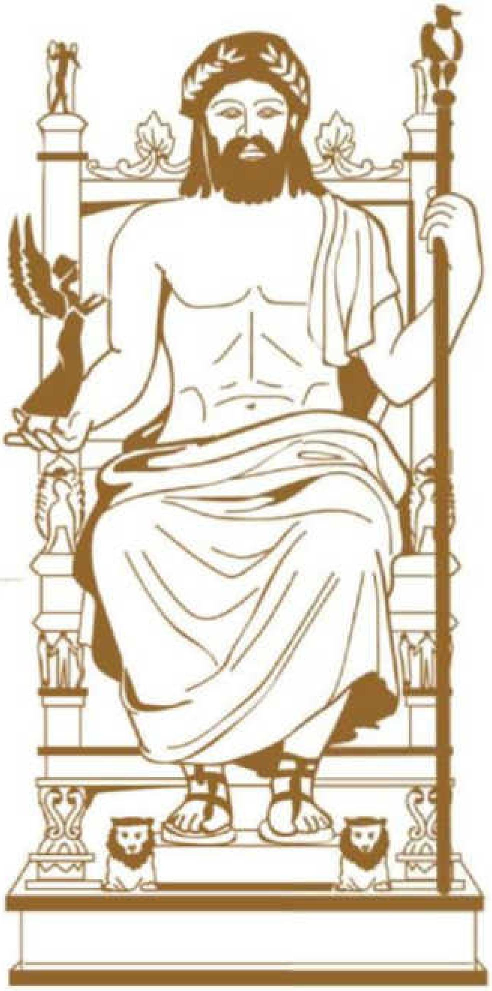
Typhon in hell
In the most widespread retelling of the myth, Typhon was imprisoned in the Underworld after his defeat by Zeus.

ZEUS

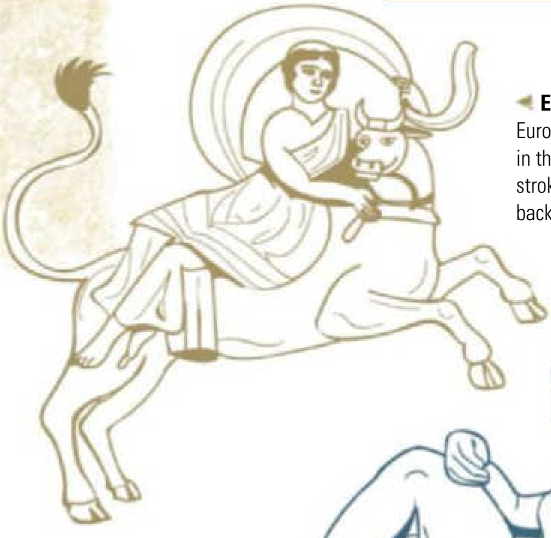
Zeus, son of the Titans Cronus and Rhea, was the god of the sky and thunder. His most feared weapon was his thunderbolt, fashioned by the Cyclopes. He became ruler of the gods when he led them in their defeat of the Titans during the Cosmic War. Though he married the goddess Hera, he was famous for his many other sexual conquests, which included goddesses, nymphs, and mortal women. Some of the numerous children of these liaisons wielded immense power over the people of Earth.

THE DISGUISES OF ZEUS

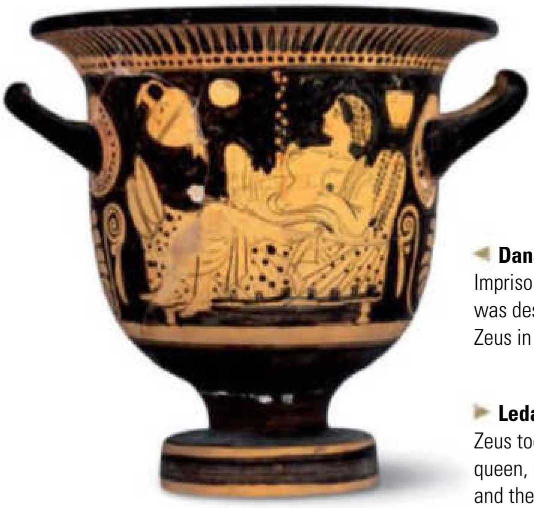
Zeus's shining body could terrify mortals and his thunderbolt could burn to death anything that came too near. For these reasons, and because many of his sexual partners were unwilling, Zeus adopted various guises when approaching his loves. He charmed Europa by taking the form of a bull, got through Danaë's prison by turning into a shower of gold, became a satyr to rape Antiope, a princess of Thebes, and approached Leda as a swan. He tricked Alcmene by disguising himself as her husband, Amphitryon, and turned into an eagle to carry off Ganymede, a young man he had fallen in love with. Zeus could disguise the objects of his love too, turning Io, a priestess of Hera, into a cow and Callisto, a nymph of Artemis, into a bear to allay the suspicions of his wife.



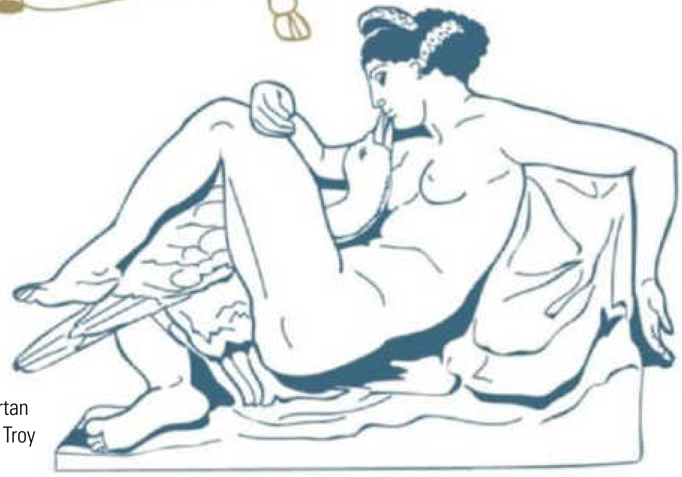
Zeus the ruler
Although he was the king of the gods, Zeus generally left the work of influencing the lives of humans to his many children, using his personal power sparingly.



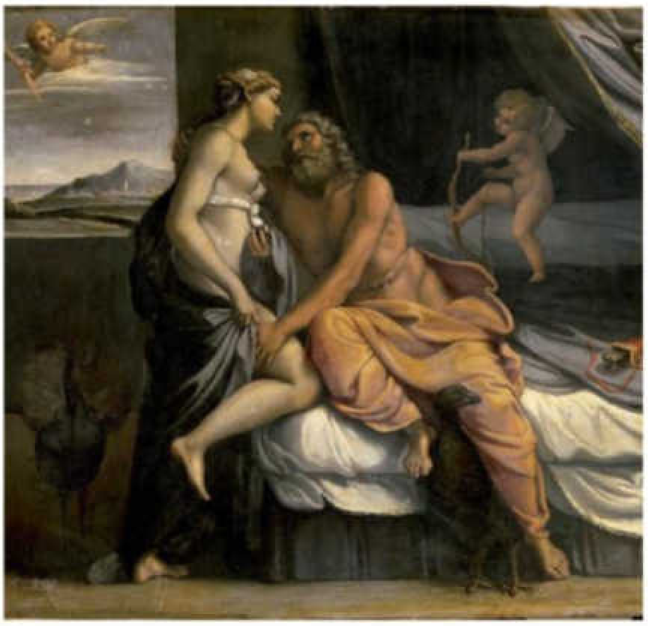
Europa and the bull
Europa, a Phoenician maiden, saw Zeus in the form of a white bull. Just as she stroked it lovingly and climbed on its back, the bull sped away with her.



Danaë and the shower of gold
Imprisoned by her father because her child was destined to kill him, Danaë fell prey to Zeus in the form of a golden shower.



Leda and the swan
Zeus took the form of a swan to woo the Spartan queen, Leda. Their children included Helen of Troy and the Dioscuri.

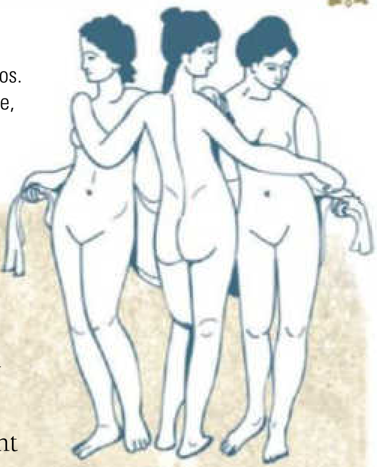


The divine couple
Although Hera was famously jealous, her worshippers stressed the importance of marriage, and some artists portrayed her and Zeus as a tender, loving couple.

ZEUS AND HERA

Zeus took his sister, Hera, the goddess of marriage, as his wife. Hera had been ignored when the great gods Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades divided up the cosmos between them, so marrying Zeus and ruling the sky as his consort gave her the power she had been denied. Most of the stories about Hera recount the jealousy she felt at her husband's affairs and the vendettas she launched against her rivals. When Io was transformed into a cow, Hera sent a fly to sting her perpetually and drive her mad. When the goddess Leto was expecting Zeus's children, Hera banned her from giving birth on the mainland or on any island. She tricked Semele into demanding that Zeus appear to her in all his glory. When he agreed reluctantly, Semele was burned to ashes by his powerful thunderbolt. Hera also persecuted the offspring of Zeus's affairs, including Dionysus and the hero Heracles, whom she drove insane – as a result of which he killed his own wife and children in a fit of madness. However, the effects on Hera's victims were rarely permanent.

The three Graces
The three Graces accompanied Aphrodite and Eros. They brought people happiness, especially in love, and their breath helped plants flourish.

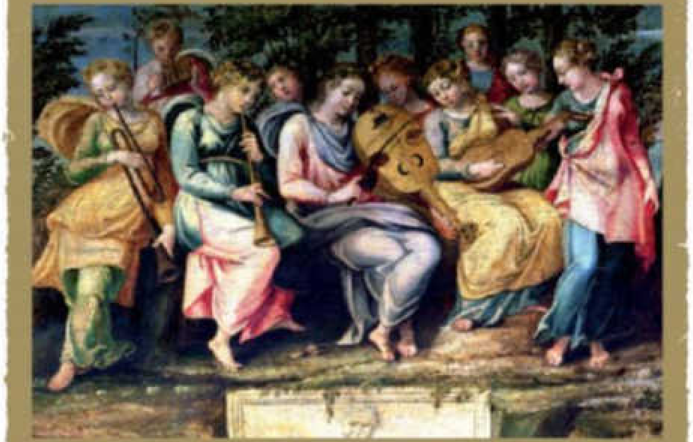


THE CHILDREN OF ZEUS

Zeus had dozens of children by his various partners, and some of these offspring had prominent parts in other Greek myths – either as immortals who ruled different aspects of the cosmos, or as heroes whose exploits became famous among mortals. Zeus and his wife, Hera, were the parents of deities such as Ares (the god of war) and Hebe (the handmaiden of the gods). Hermes was the product of his union with Maia, and his affair with Metis resulted in the birth of Athena. With Leto, Zeus fathered the twin deities Apollo and Artemis, while with Eurynome he produced the three Graces. His liaison with the Titaness named Mnemosyne (memory) produced the Muses, and his affair with Ananke produced the Fates. Among his mortal loves, Europa was the mother of Sarpedon (a hero of the Trojan War), Minos (the King of Crete), and Rhadamanthus (who became a judge of the dead). Danaë gave birth to the hero Perseus, while Alcmene was the mother of the famed Heracles.

THE MUSES

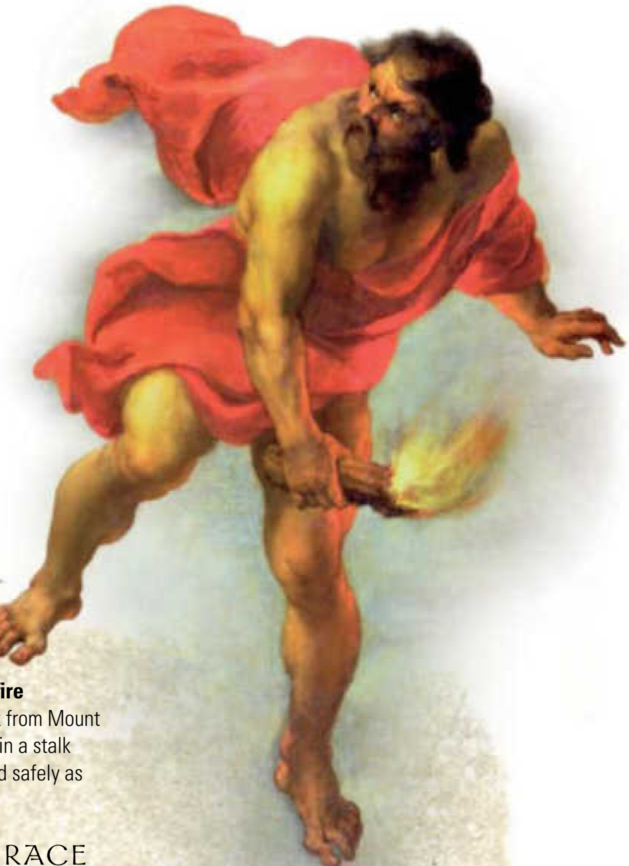
The daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne were the Muses, who presided over the arts and were associated with Apollo in his role as the god of the arts. There were originally said to be many Muses, who together inspired poetry and other arts, but later writers named nine, giving each a specific art. The nine Muses were Calliope (Muse of poetic inspiration), Clio (history), Erato (lyric poetry), Euterpe (instrumental music), Melpomene (tragedy), Polyhymnia (harmony), Terpsichore (dance and choral song), Thalia (comedy), and Urania (scholarship or astronomy). The Muses were said to dwell on mountains, where their singing and dancing charmed and inspired all those who encountered them.



The Muses with Apollo

THE CREATION OF HUMANKIND

Unlike many cultures, ancient Greece did not have a single story narrating the origins of humanity. Greek myths mention several attempts at creating humans, or mortals as they were known. Three of these attempts failed before the current race of humans finally emerged, although it is not clear who is responsible for their creation. However, the origins of key cultural skills, such as fire-making, are firmly attributed to the Titan Prometheus, who is portrayed as a friend of humanity.

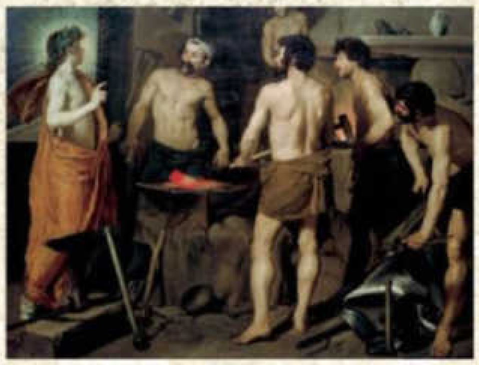


Prometheus steals fire
Prometheus stole a spark from Mount Olympus and wrapped it in a stalk of fennel, where it burned safely as he carried it to humanity.

THE MYTH

The first attempt at creating a human race took place when the Titans, led by Cronus, ruled the cosmos. The result was the Golden Race, a group of people who lived an ideal existence without work or ageing, and for whom life was one long feast. When the people of the Golden Race finally died, their death was like a peaceful sleep. Nevertheless, it left the Earth unpopulated.

Intent on filling up the void, the Olympians created the Silver Race, who lived for a long time but grew very slowly to maturity. Their children were brought up carefully by their mothers, and spent one hundred years as babies before reaching adulthood. However, they turned out to be dull and unintelligent people, fighting continuously among themselves, and once they became adults they tended to die quickly. These qualities, together with their refusal to worship or even respect the gods, exasperated Zeus, so he banished them to the Underworld. Zeus then crafted a new race out of clay. The people of this race wore bronze armour and used tools made of the same metal, so they were called the Bronze Race. Like the Silver Race, they were aggressive, and destroyed themselves in ruthless battles.



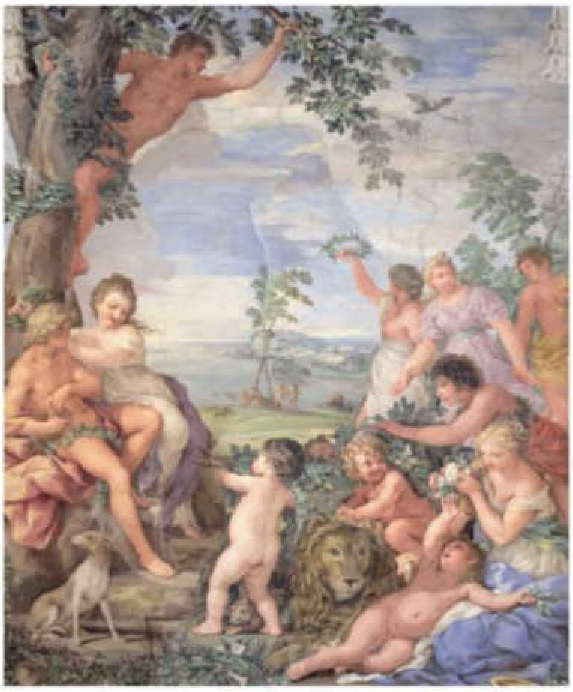
The forge of Hephaestus
Prometheus found his fire in the workshop of Hephaestus, where the craftsman god (and, some say, the Cyclopes) forged Zeus's thunderbolts and other powerful weapons.

THE HUMAN RACE

Finally, the current race of humans appeared. Some say that the great Titan craftsman, Prometheus, was its creator. Whether or not he actually created humanity, Prometheus certainly became its protector. He taught humans many important skills, including navigation and medicine, and showed them how to make sacrifices, by keeping some of the meat for themselves and offering the rest to the gods. Once, the people killed a bull but could not agree on which part to offer the gods. Prometheus cleverly wrapped the meat in the bull's skin, and the bones in its fat. Zeus chose the bones covered in fat, and became so angry at the deception that he refused to give fire to the humans.

THE THEFT OF FIRE

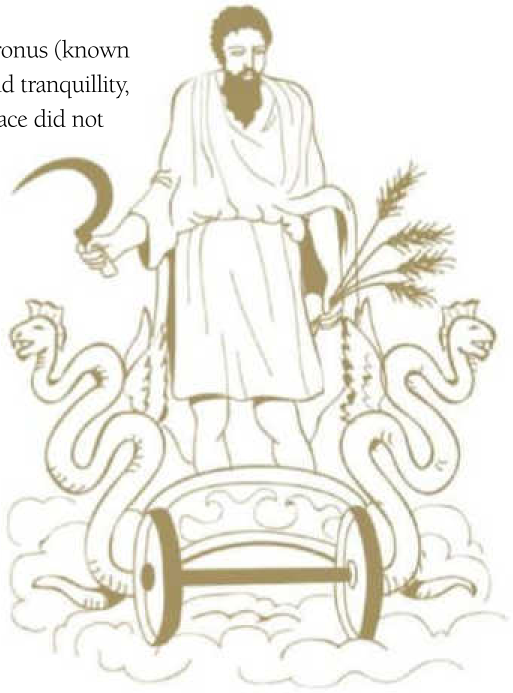
Taking the side of humanity, Prometheus stole fire from heaven and carried it to Earth so that the people could cook their food and heat their homes. Zeus punished Prometheus for the theft by having him chained to a rock, where an eagle came to peck at his liver every day.



THE GOLDEN AGE

During the Golden Age, the world was ruled by Cronus (known to the Romans as Saturn). It was a time of peace and tranquillity, as there was no war or injustice, and the Golden Race did not have to work because enough food was readily available from plants and trees. In later eras, the Golden Age became a byword for a time in the distant past when things were much better than the present. The idea of the Golden Age became fashionable in the Renaissance (c.1350–c.1550), when Italian artists and writers rediscovered the culture of ancient Greece, and this Classical era became a favourite subject for painters.

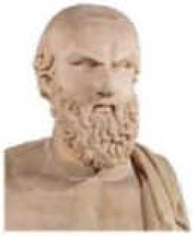
The Golden Race
Renaissance artists saw the Golden Age as a time of such peace that humans could live side by side with wild animals without any fear of attack.



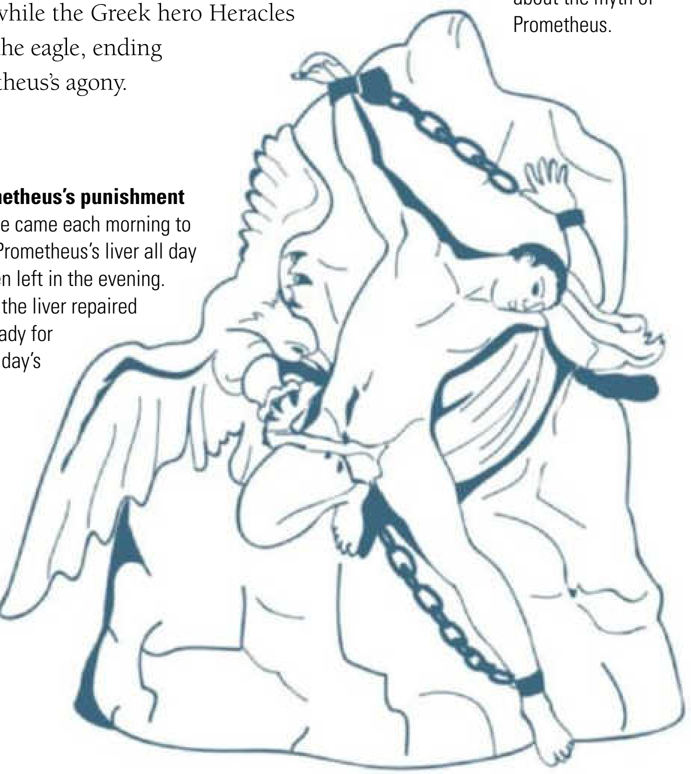
Cronus
Despite his violence towards his own children, Cronus is often seen as a gentle, just, and kind ruler of the Golden Age. He was worshipped as a harvest deity.

PROMETHEUS BOUND

As punishment for stealing fire from the gods, Zeus had Prometheus chained to a rock in a place said to be on the borders of Earth and Chaos. Here, he was condemned to suffer while an eagle pecked at his liver, which constantly repaired itself so that the torture could continue. Zeus decreed that Prometheus should remain bound until another creature offered to be bound in his place. After thousands of years, a wounded centaur called Cheiron offered to take Prometheus's place. When he arrived at the rock, Zeus turned Cheiron into a constellation of stars, while the Greek hero Heracles killed the eagle, ending Prometheus's agony.



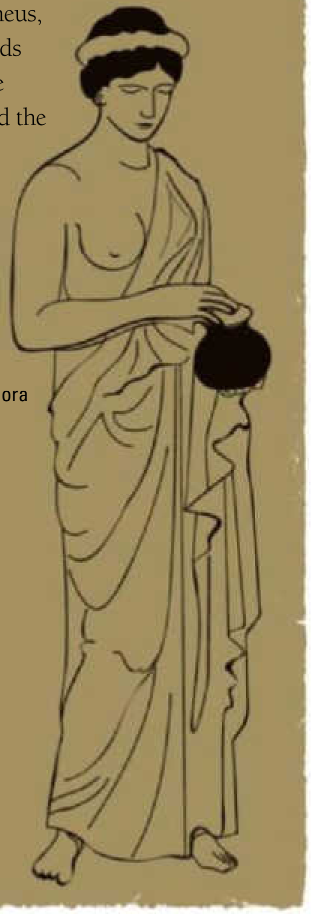
Aeschylus
The Greek dramatist Aeschylus, who lived in the 5th century BCE, wrote several plays about the myth of Prometheus.



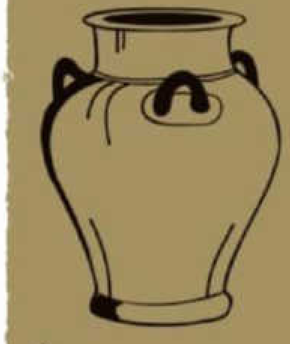
Prometheus's punishment
The eagle came each morning to peck at Prometheus's liver all day long, then left in the evening. By night the liver repaired itself, ready for the next day's torment.

PANDORA

Zeus wanted to punish the humans after Prometheus stole fire for them, so he (or, some say, Hephaestus) created a beautiful mortal woman called Pandora. She married Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus, who took her to Earth. The gods gave her many gifts, which she kept in a jar. When she opened the jar, it contained plagues and disasters, which condemned humanity to a life marred by misery. The only positive thing in the jar was hope, the sole consolation for the human race.



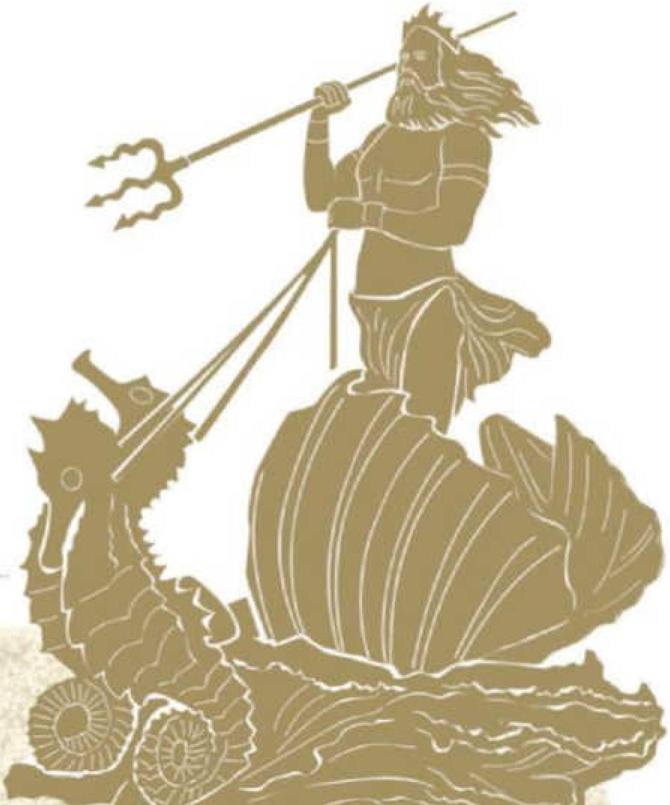
Pandora



Storage jar
Artists often portray Pandora carrying a box, but Greek sources describe her bearing a *pithos*, or large storage jar.

POSEIDON AND THE FLOOD

Many ancient Greeks lived on islands or in settlements close to the coast, so their lives were dominated by the sea. Consequently, the sea god Poseidon, a bringer of violent storms, who also controlled natural forces such as earthquakes, was one of the most powerful gods of Mount Olympus. But he longed for more power, and became involved in a dispute with Athena for the great honour of being the patron deity of the city of Athens.



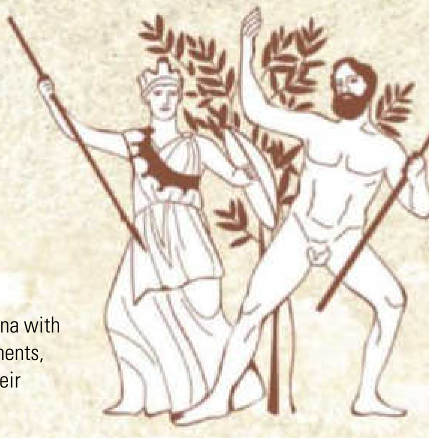
Poseidon
The god of the sea is often shown as a bearded man holding a trident and enthroned in a giant clam shell or aboard a shell-like chariot pulled by dolphins or seahorses.

THE MYTH

Poseidon and Athena both wanted to be the controlling deity of the city of Athens. Rather than declaring war and fighting a battle, the two gods decided that they would settle their dispute by competing to provide the best gift for the city's people. The sea god climbed the Acropolis (the hill overlooking Athens); when he reached the top, he struck the ground hard with his trident and a saltwater spring began to flow. Then Athena came to the Acropolis and offered her gift: the first olive tree to grow in the city.

THE GODS' JUDGEMENT

Zeus summoned the other gods from Mount Olympus to judge the gifts and decide which of the two was greater. The appearance of the spring was impressive, but salt water was of little use to the people. The olive tree, on the other hand, provided a source of olives, and their oil was useful for both cooking and lighting. Olive oil was valuable not just to the Athenians but also to those with whom they traded – so the tree could both nourish the people of Athens and make them rich. They would be able to use the olive wood, too, to construct things. King Cecrops, the ruler of Greece, confirmed that such a tree had never been seen on the Acropolis. After hearing all the evidence, Zeus declared Athena to be the winner of the contest. She became the city's patron deity, and the place was named after her.



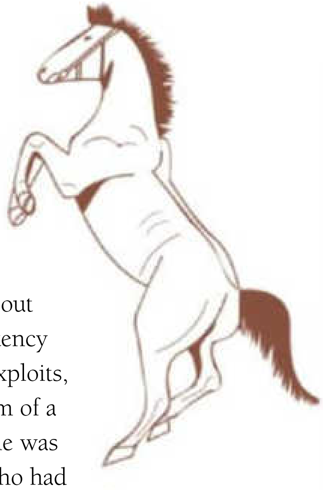
The dispute with Athena
Poseidon with his trident and Athena with her spear made formidable opponents, although they decided to settle their dispute peacefully.

THE COMING OF THE FLOOD

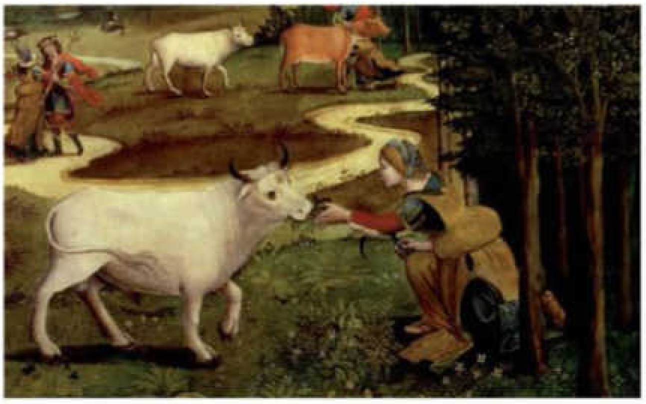
Poseidon was furious when he heard the result of the competition. He took up his trident and smote the sea many times, causing a great storm. The waters rose and the plain of Eleusis, where Athens stood, was flooded. The waters covered the plain for a long time, but finally they subsided, allowing the Athenians to repair their city. They built a temple to their new goddess, Athena, who would bring them prosperity, but also made offerings to Poseidon, to placate the angry god.

POSEIDON AND THE BEASTS

Poseidon was linked closely with the vitality and energy of animals. Two creatures especially associated with him were the bull and the stallion. Both were singled out by the Greeks for their sexual potency and violence. During his sexual exploits, Poseidon sometimes took the form of a horse, as on the occasion when he was pursuing the goddess Demeter, who had turned herself into a mare. The destructive bull that rose from the sea in some myths, such as that of Hippolytus, is also a manifestation of Poseidon's power.



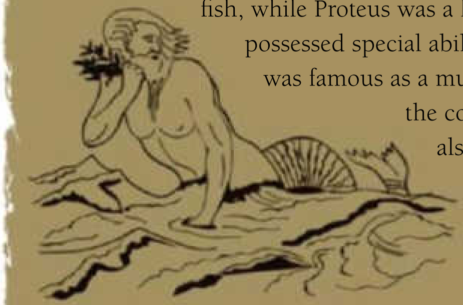
Stallion
One myth tells how the first horse grew from semen that Poseidon had spilled on a rock.



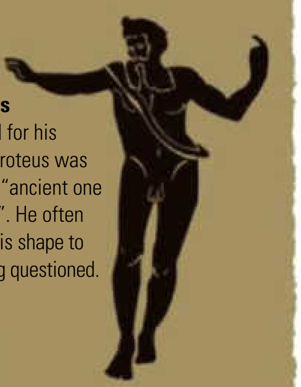
Pasiphae and the Cretan Bull
After a curse from Poseidon, the queen of Crete, Pasiphae, fell in love with, and mated with, a bull sent by the sea god. The offspring of this union was the Minotaur.

OTHER CLASSICAL SEA GODS

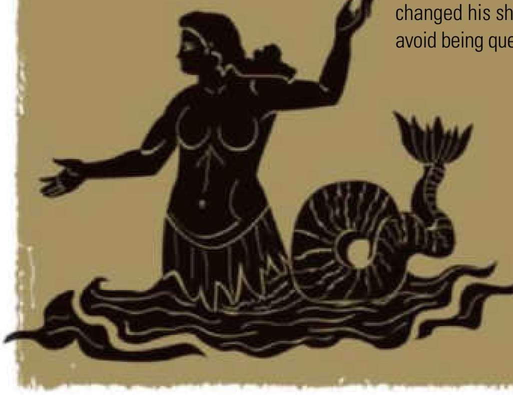
The Greeks worshipped several other sea gods, although they were not as powerful as Poseidon. Some of them were linked with particular sea creatures. For example, Glaucus was associated with fish, while Proteus was a herder of seals. Others possessed special abilities. Triton, for example, was famous as a musician who played on the conch shell. Proteus was also known for his great wisdom, although he did not like answering people's questions.



Glaucus
Originally a fisherman, Glaucus was made immortal when he ate a herb with magical powers. He became one of the minor gods of the sea.



Proteus
Renowned for his wisdom, Proteus was called the "ancient one of the sea". He often changed his shape to avoid being questioned.

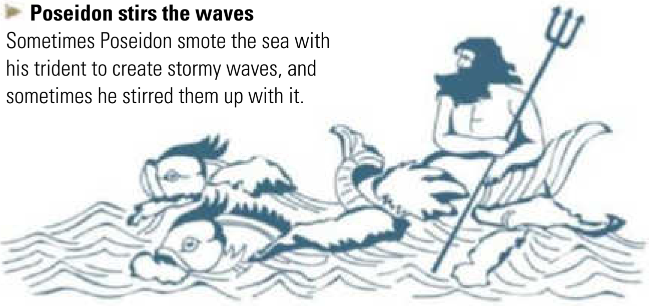


Triton
Half-fish, half-man, Triton was a familiar deity of the sea. Some myths say there were several Tritons.

POSEIDON AND ODYSSEUS

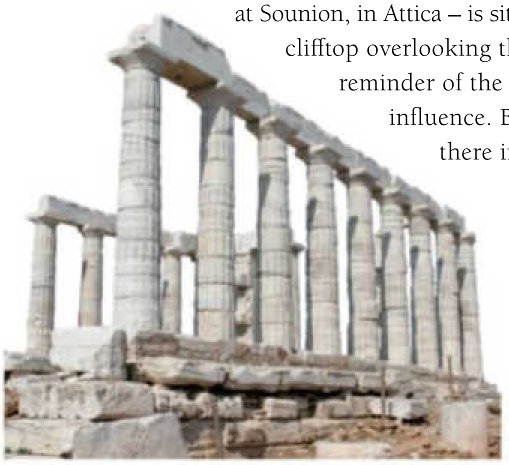
Homer's *Odyssey* describes the return of the tragic hero Odysseus from Troy to Ithaca as a series of mishaps at sea. Most of these were due to Poseidon and came about because Odysseus had blinded the Cyclopes Polyphemus, who was the sea god's son. The poem describes vividly how the god stirred up storms and tempests, which wrecked Odysseus's ship and drowned his companions. Many of the perils Odysseus faced, such as the whirlpool Charybdis, were the offspring of Poseidon.

Poseidon stirs the waves
Sometimes Poseidon smote the sea with his trident to create stormy waves, and sometimes he stirred them up with it.



TEMPLES TO POSEIDON

As a powerful deity, Poseidon was widely revered and some of his temples have survived. He was not always worshipped as a sea god – some temples were dedicated to Poseidon Hippios ("Poseidon of horses"), and many people worshipped a form of Poseidon who was a god of plants. At least one of his temples in Greece, though – the temple at Sounion, in Attica – is sited on a spectacular clifftop overlooking the sea, a clear reminder of the deity's sphere of influence. Boat races were held there in honour of the god.



Temple at Sounion
Poseidon's temple at Sounion could be seen by ships far out at sea. Now it survives as an evocative ruin, with two rows of columns set on a stone platform.

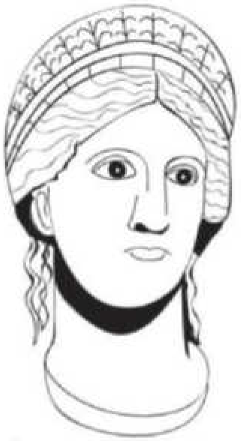
DIONYSUS

The god of wine, Dionysus was an anarchic figure who presided over drunkenness and other irrational or altered states, such as religious ecstasy. A shape-changer, he could take the form of an animal but also appeared as a human, when he was often accompanied by revellers or animals. These qualities made him a patron of actors, and plays were regularly performed at the Athenian festivals held in his name.

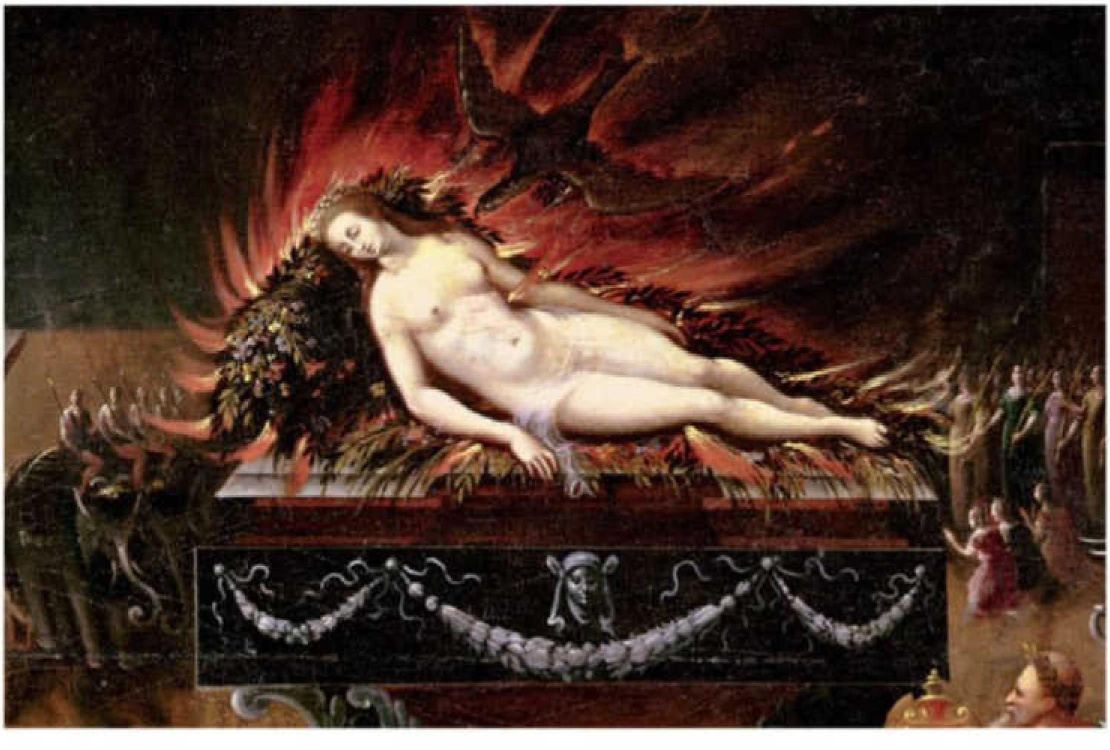
▲ **Dionysus**
The god of wine in all its aspects, Dionysus has often been portrayed as a handsome young man carrying a cup, with vine leaves in his hair.

THE RESCUE OF DIONYSUS

When Zeus, disguised as a mortal, began an affair with Semele, the daughter of King Cadmus and Queen Harmonia of Thebes, his wife, Hera, grew jealous and plotted her revenge. She took the form of an old woman and persuaded Semele to ask the god to appear before her in all his splendour. When he did so, the heat from his thunderbolt killed Semele, who was a mortal. One of the gods – some say Hermes, others the river goddess Dirce – rescued her unborn child, Dionysius, and took him to Zeus, who cut an opening in his thigh and placed the child safely inside until it was ready to be born. When Dionysus emerged from Zeus's thigh, Hera was so angry that she incited the Titans to tear the baby into pieces. His grandmother, Rhea, took pity on Dionysus, put his body back together, and carried him to foster parents. Again, Hera discovered what had happened, so to protect him Rhea disguised the child as a ram.



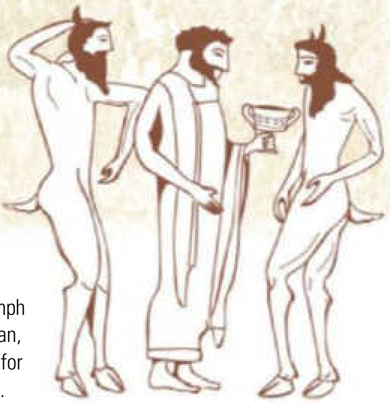
▲ **Hera**
In the story of Dionysus, Hera plays her usual role as jealous wife. She defeats her rival Semele, but not Semele's child.



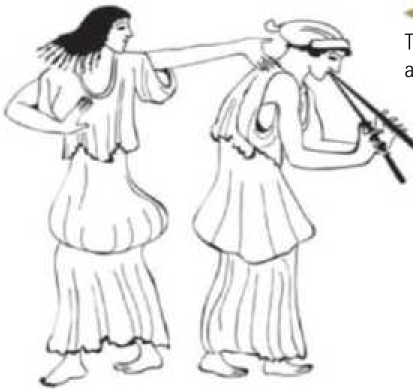
► **Semele**
Flames from Zeus's thunderbolt killed Semele. Her story became a popular subject for painters and for the composer Handel, who wrote an opera about her.

THE JOURNEY OF DIONYSUS

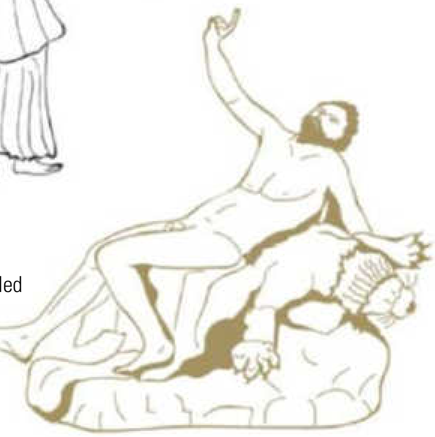
As he grew up, Dionysus became restless and went on a series of long journeys. Wherever he travelled, he became famous for his drunken excesses, which ended in a kind of insane frenzy. Many said that this frenzy was caused by Hera, who was still resentful that the son of Semele had survived. Dionysus was accompanied on his travels by satyrs, led by their king, Silenus. Also among his companions were a group of female followers called the "Maenads". The Maenads were possessed with a kind of madness, in which they worked themselves into an ecstatic frenzy. As they did this, they danced a wild dance, eventually getting so out of control that they would rip apart any creature they came across. The Maenads drew their strength from Dionysus, so that nothing – neither fire nor the sword – could stop their dance or bring them to harm.



Satyrs
The offspring of a mountain nymph and a goat, a satyr was half-man, half-goat. Satyrs were famous for getting drunk and for being lewd.



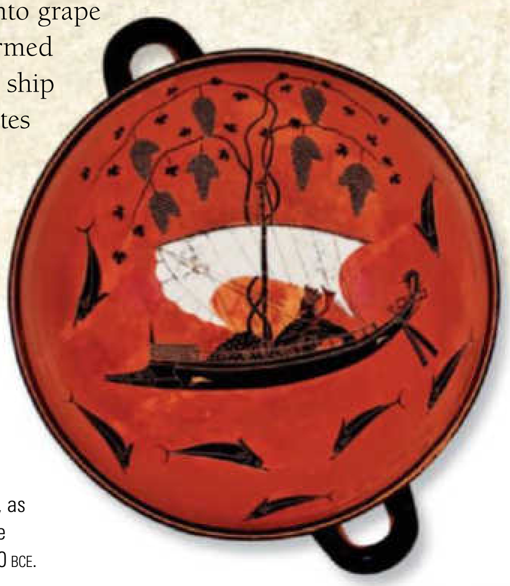
Maenads
The Maenads wore sheer dresses and danced to the music of the double flute and tambourine. They had power over wild beasts and were sometimes shown riding panthers.



Silenus
A wise old satyr, Silenus led Dionysus's followers. Some myths say he was one of those who brought up the god when he was a child.

THE WINE-DARK SEA

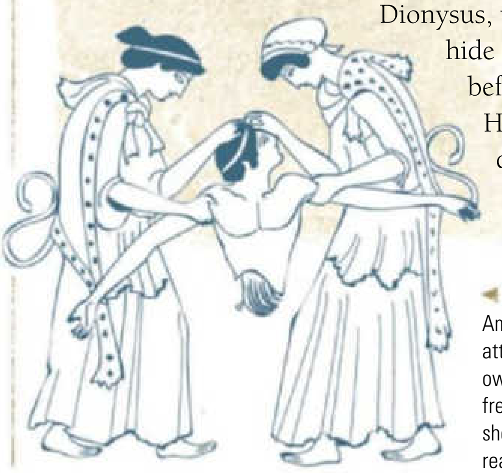
As he travelled around the Mediterranean, Dionysus told those who met and followed him how to harvest the grapes, press them, and turn their juice into wine. When people tasted the results, he became very popular. Once the god was on his travels when he was captured by pirates, who thought he was a wealthy young man. When the pirates tried to tie him up, however, the knots kept untying of their own accord. Dionysus then made the mast and rigging turn into grape vines, and transformed the sea around the ship into wine. The pirates were so frightened by the sight of this that they jumped into the sea.



Pirate porpoises
When the terrified pirates jumped into the sea, Dionysus turned them all into porpoises, as depicted in this painting on the inside of a cup from around 530 BCE.

THE TRAGEDY OF PENTHEUS

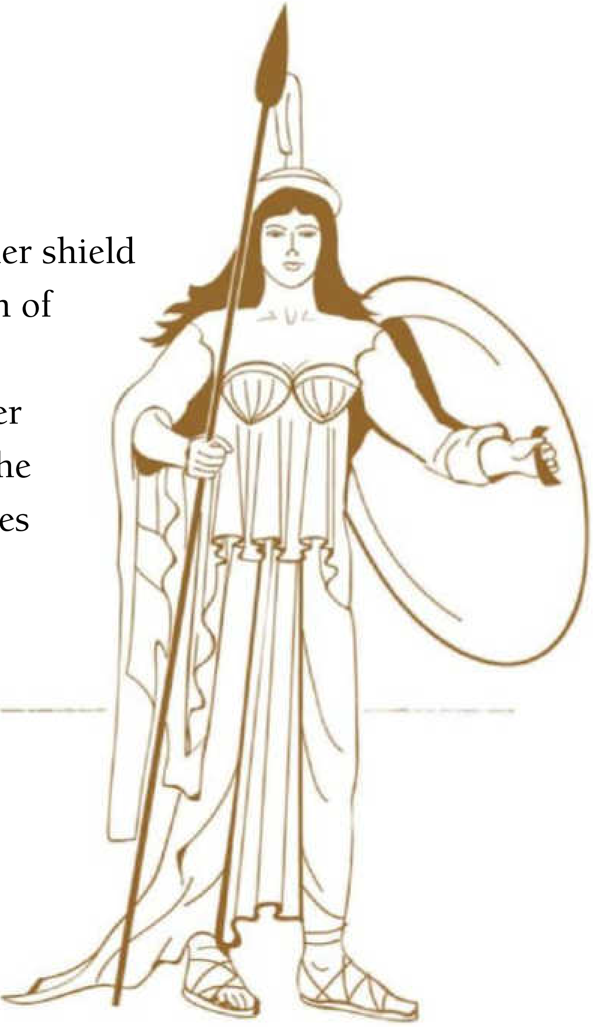
The dancing journey of Dionysus and the Maenads brought them to Thebes, which was ruled by Pentheus. The young king's mother, Agave, was attracted to Dionysus and became a Maenad, getting drunk and joining the frenzied dance. Pentheus was horrified to see his mother's behaviour and decided to try to stop the dance. He turned for advice to Dionysus, who told the king to hide and watch secretly before doing anything. However, the Maenads discovered Pentheus and tore him to pieces.



Death of Pentheus
Among the Maenads who attacked Pentheus was his own mother, Agave. In her frenzy, she at first thought she was killing a lion, before realizing it was her son.

ATHENA

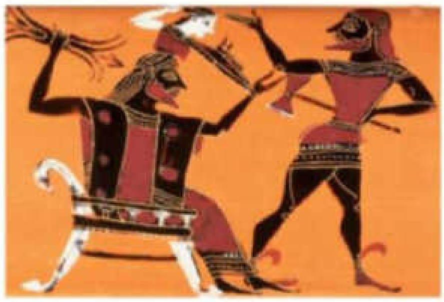
A powerful war goddess, Athena was usually depicted with her shield or protective cloak, known as the aegis. She was also a patron of crafts, especially pottery, weaving, and shipbuilding, and the goddess of the city of Athens. She inherited the wisdom of her mother, Metis, an attribute that made her favour Odysseus, the wisest and most cunning of the Greek heroes. In all these roles she was especially valued because she was always accessible, unlike many gods who kept their distance from humans.



Athena armed for war Athena's favoured weapon was her spear, which she held upright when at rest, and brandished aloft when in battle. She also wore a helmet to protect her head.

THE BIRTH OF ATHENA

One of the first loves of the god Zeus was Metis, daughter of the Titans Oceanus and Tethys. Metis was known not only for her beauty but also for her brains – her name means "cunning intelligence". She was especially dear to Zeus, but when she became pregnant, Gaia and Uranus told Zeus that after she had given birth to a daughter, Metis would then have a son, also by Zeus, who would take away all his power. They advised Zeus to act at once to prevent this. Gaia told Zeus that the best way to stop this chain of events was to swallow Metis whole before she gave birth. Zeus did this, but when it was time for Metis's daughter to be born, Hephaestus intervened, splitting open Zeus's head with an axe and enabling the child to step forth. Miraculously, Athena emerged from Zeus's skull fully armed, uttering a war cry. According to several accounts, Athena was her father's favourite child, and the only one allowed to use his aegis.



Athena's birth Early depictions of the birth of Athena, such as this vase painting, show the goddess emerging from her father's head, already equipped with arms and armour.

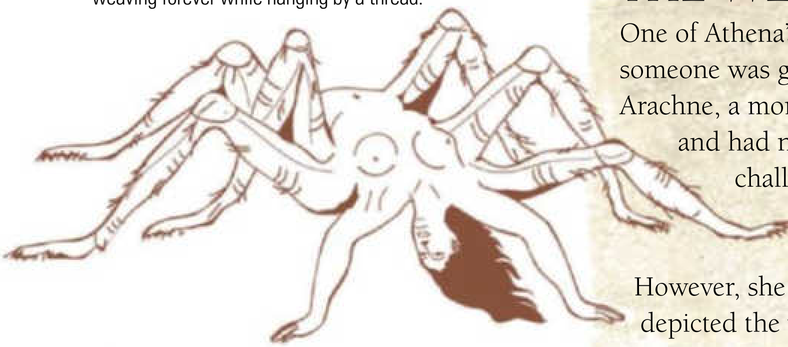
GODDESS OF ATHENS

Athena won the right to be venerated as the goddess of Athens when, in a competition with Poseidon, she gave the citizens of Athens the valuable gift of the olive tree. The people acknowledged her importance by putting images of her and her sacred bird, the owl, on their coins. To worship her, they built the Parthenon on the Acropolis above the city, where the contest between Athena and Poseidon was depicted in a sculpture. This temple also housed a massive ivory and gold statue of Athena, created by the noted sculptor Phidias. Unfortunately, the statue no longer exists, though many miniature reproductions of it have been found. The temple's name comes from the title Parthenos (virgin), given to the goddess because she guarded her chastity so carefully.

The Parthenon

Athenian coin

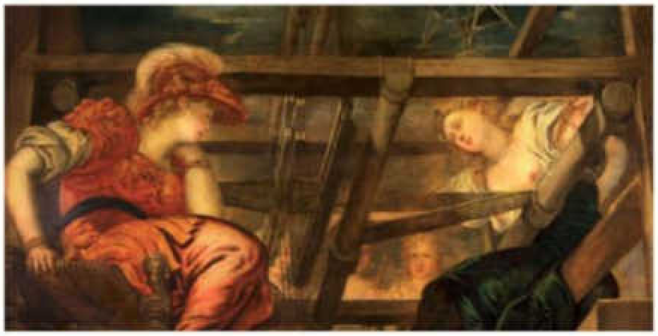
Arachne turning into a spider
Athena took pity on Arachne and turned her into a spider, so that she could go on spinning and weaving forever while hanging by a thread.



THE WEAVING CONTEST

One of Athena's roles was as the goddess of weavers and embroiderers. When someone was good at weaving, people said their gift came from Athena. But Arachne, a mortal girl and a fine weaver, insisted that her gift was her own, and had nothing to do with the goddess. This angered Athena, so she challenged Arachne to a weaving and embroidery contest. Athena saw that Arachne's weaving was at least as good as her own work, which showed the gods victorious over the mortals. However, she was offended by the subject of Arachne's tapestry, which depicted the various infidelities of her father, Zeus. In her jealousy and rage she tore up Arachne's work. A humiliated Arachne resolved to hang herself. But Athena decided that this was too harsh a punishment and transformed Arachne into a spider instead, so that she could continue weaving.

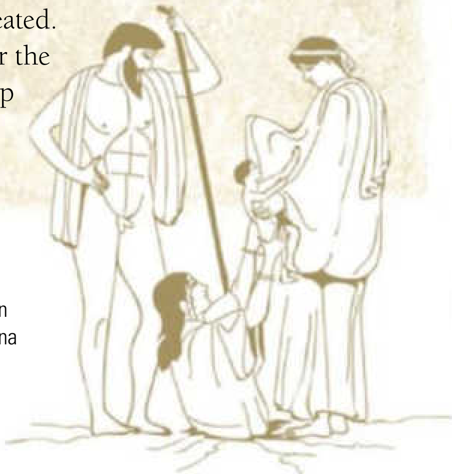
Arachne weaving
Athena was spellbound by the beauty and quality of Arachne's work. Some say she was so jealous that in a fit of anger she struck the girl with her own weaving shuttle.



> TO THE GODDESS YIELD,
> AND HUMBLY MEEK
> A PARDON FOR YOUR BOLD
> PRESUMPTION SEEK.
>
> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

ATHENA AND HEPHAESTUS

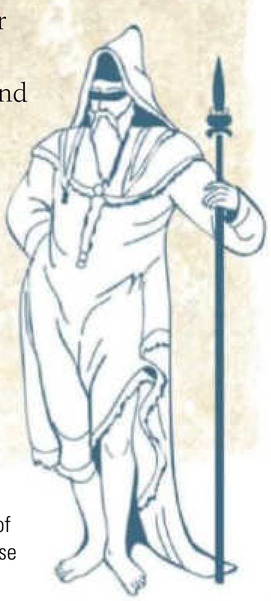
The craftsman god Hephaestus, who rescued Athena from her father's skull, had a lasting interest in the goddess. As she grew up, Hephaestus fell in love with her and asked Zeus for permission to marry her. Zeus agreed, provided that his daughter was willing. But Athena valued her virginity and did not want to marry, so she turned Hephaestus down. Hephaestus then tried to rape Athena, but the powerful goddess pushed him away and Hephaestus spilled his seed onto the ground. The seed fertilized Gaia (Mother Earth) and Erichthonius was created. Athena agreed to rear the child, and he grew up to later become the ruler of Athens.



Athena the foster mother
Gaia hands over her newborn son Erichthonius to the waiting Athena while Hephaestus looks on.

THE BATHING OF ATHENA

Athena, who was a modest goddess, did not like others to watch when she bathed at the sacred spring called Hippocrene on Mount Helicon. But Tiresias, a man from Thebes, was so entranced by the beauty of the goddess that he followed her and her attendant nymphs, and spied on the goddess as she took off her clothes and bathed. When Athena realized she was being watched, she climbed out and in her anger hit Tiresias across the eyes, making him go blind. One of the nymphs was sorry for Tiresias and begged Athena to give him something in compensation for the loss of his sight. So Athena gave Tiresias the gift of prophecy.



Tiresias
The seer Tiresias predicted many events, using his gift of prophecy to intervene in numerous myths, including those about Oedipus and the city of Thebes.

THE LOVES OF APHRODITE

The name of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, means "born from the foam". She was born in the frothing sea and was famous both for her exquisite beauty and for her many lovers, who included both gods and mortals. Her partners found it impossible to resist her charms, and this magnetic attraction made her one of the most powerful of all the deities. Yet some accounts describe her as vain, ill-tempered, and easily offended. Her children included the Trojan prince, Aeneas, and Priapus, the god of fertility.

Dove, symbol of Aphrodite

THE MYTH

Aphrodite was married to Hephaestus, the divine blacksmith. He adored her and crafted beautiful gifts for her. Among them was a golden chariot drawn by doves, which were sacred to her. However, she was frequently unfaithful to him. Of her many affairs, the most famous of all was with Ares, the god of war. This affair produced four children, the first two of whom took after their father, while the second two inherited their mother's character. They were Deimos (Terror), Phobos (Fear), Harmonia (Harmony), and, according to some accounts of the story, Eros (Sexual Love).

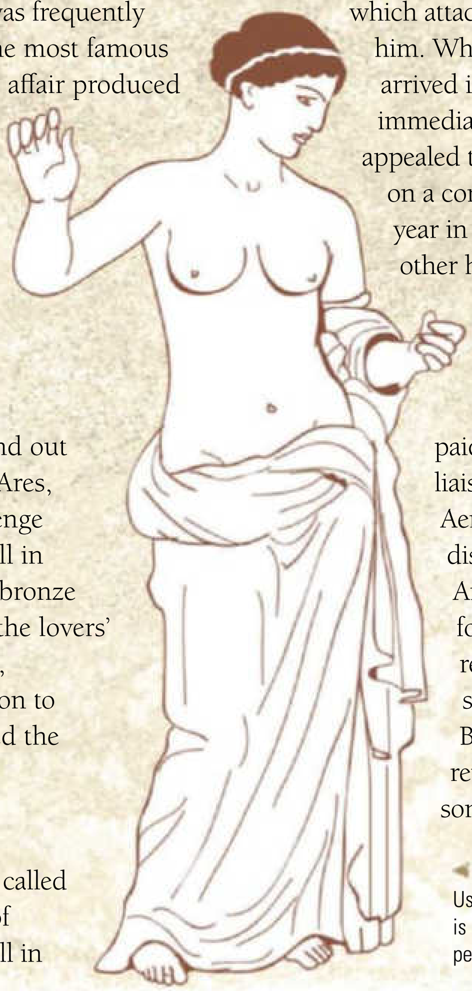
THE LOVERS TRAPPED

It was some time before Hephaestus found out about his wife's liaison with his brother, Ares, but when he did, he decided to take revenge by ridiculing the couple. He used his skill in metalworking to make a large net out of bronze wire, and secretly suspended this above the lovers' bed. When the pair were in bed together, Hephaestus tugged the net so that it fell on to the couple, trapping them. Then he called the gods to witness the ludicrous sight.

MORTAL LOVES

Another of Aphrodite's loves was a mortal called Adonis. Unfortunately, Persephone, wife of Hades, the god of the Underworld, also fell in love with him. Of the two, Adonis preferred Aphrodite, and a jealous Persephone told Ares about the affair. Enraged, Ares unleashed a wild boar, which attacked Adonis and killed him. When he died, Adonis arrived in the Underworld, where he was immediately pursued by Persephone. Aphrodite appealed to Zeus, and the king of the gods decided on a compromise. Adonis would spend half the year in the Underworld with Persephone, and the other half with Aphrodite.

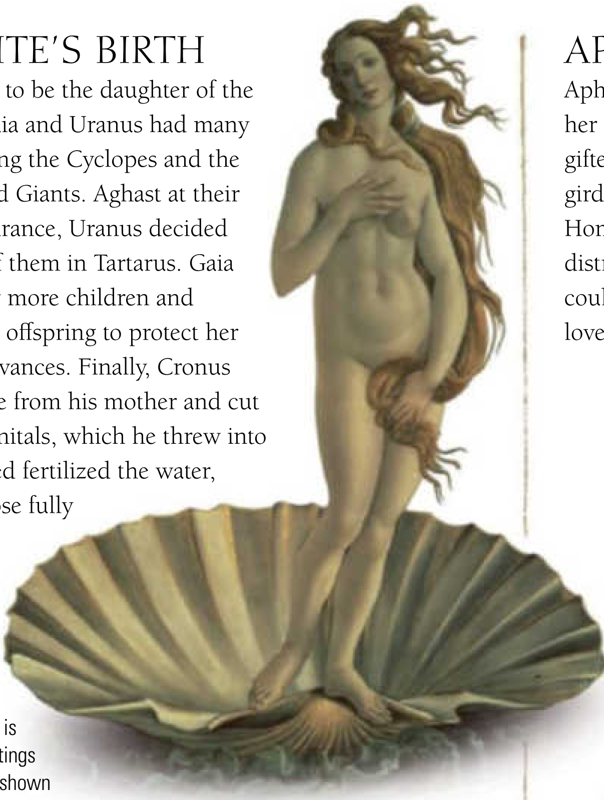
The death of Adonis shows how dangerous it was for a mere mortal to fall in love with Aphrodite. Another mortal who fell for her charms, Anchises, also paid dearly. Anchises was a shepherd, whose liaison with Aphrodite produced the hero Aeneas, ancestor of the Romans. Aphrodite disguised herself as a mortal to sleep with Anchises, but he glimpsed her in her true form. Aphrodite made him promise not to reveal the affair – an alliance with a mere shepherd would damage her reputation. But once, when Anchises was drunk, he revealed the secret and was blinded (or, some say, lamed) by Zeus as punishment.



The goddess of love
Usually depicted as a beautiful young woman, Aphrodite is often shown naked. Because she represented physical perfection, she was a favourite subject for sculptors.

APHRODITE'S BIRTH

Aphrodite is said to be the daughter of the Titan Uranus. Gaia and Uranus had many children, including the Cyclopes and the Hundred-Handed Giants. Aghast at their monstrous appearance, Uranus decided to imprison all of them in Tartarus. Gaia did not want any more children and pleaded with her offspring to protect her from Uranus's advances. Finally, Cronus borrowed a sickle from his mother and cut off his father's genitals, which he threw into the sea. Their seed fertilized the water, and Aphrodite rose fully grown from the foaming waves.

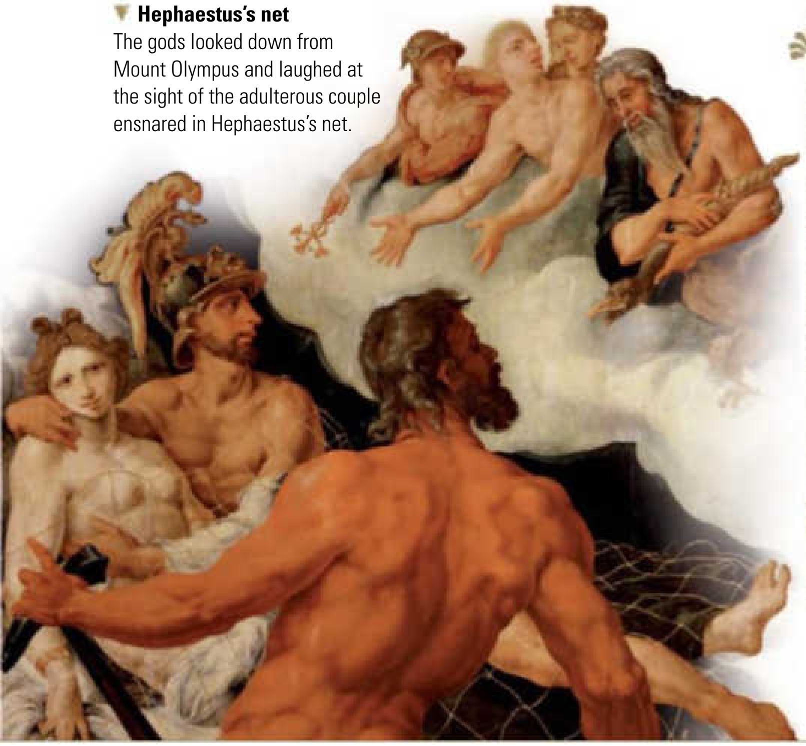


Aphrodite
The birth of Aphrodite is often depicted in paintings where the goddess is shown rising from the waves on a shell.

HEPHAESTUS

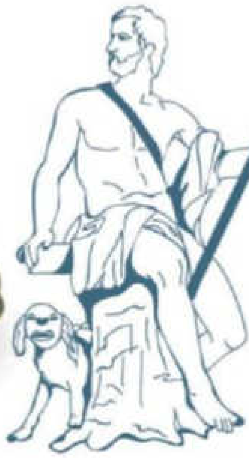
The god of fire and metalworking, Hephaestus was also the deity who controlled volcanoes, which were said to be his workshops. He was lame, as the result of an injury that came about when he had an argument with Zeus, who then threw him off Mount Olympus. This infirmity gave Hephaestus a comic quality for the Greeks, who revered physical perfection. In spite of this, he was admired for his ingenuity and skill in making things, from the net that captured Aphrodite and Ares, to a magical throne on which he could imprison his enemies.

Hephaestus's net
The gods looked down from Mount Olympus and laughed at the sight of the adulterous couple ensnared in Hephaestus's net.

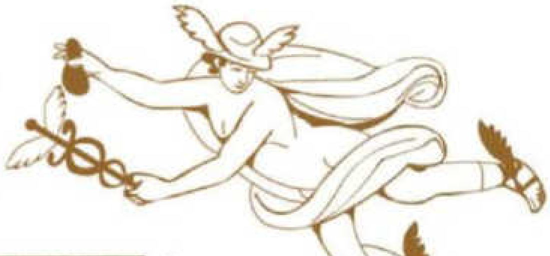


APHRODITE'S LOVERS

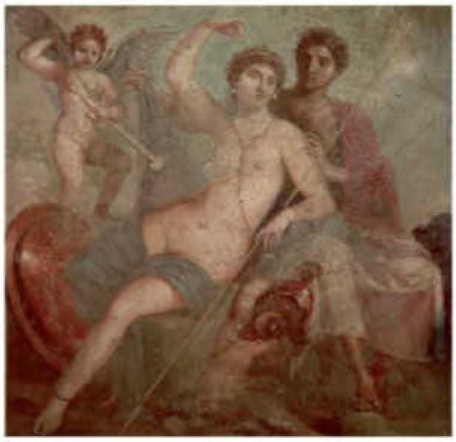
Aphrodite's power to make others fall in love with her came from her great physical beauty. She also had an aphrodisiac girdle, ironically gifted to her by Hephaestus, which she wore next to her breasts. This girdle was the envy of other goddesses who wanted Aphrodite's allure. Homer's *Iliad*, for example, tells how the goddess Hera borrowed it to distract Zeus with her charms during the Trojan War so that the Greeks could win. Although Aphrodite was married to Hephaestus and was in love with Ares, she also used her charms to attract many other lovers.



Adonis
The mortal Adonis was a passionate hunter. He disregarded Aphrodite's warning about hunting an animal that knows no fear, and paid the price when he was killed by a wild boar sent by Ares.



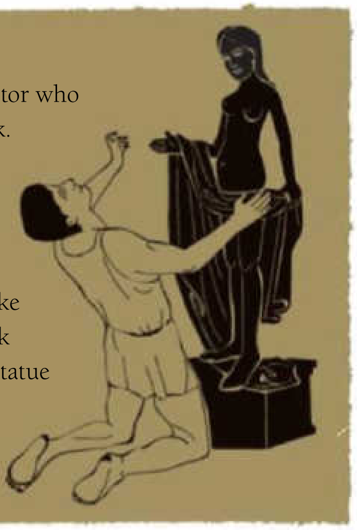
Hermes
The messenger of the gods was attracted to Aphrodite when he saw her under the net with Ares. His affair with her produced the child Hermaphroditus.



Ares and Aphrodite
The sun god Helios, from whom nothing was hidden, spied Ares and Aphrodite together and informed Hephaestus, who then planned his revenge.

PYGMALION

Pygmalion was a remarkable sculptor who poured all his energy into his work. He was so skilled that once he carved a statue of a beautiful woman that was incredibly lifelike. He fell in love with it and prayed to Aphrodite to let him make love to his creation. Aphrodite took pity on him and transformed the statue into a real woman named Galatea, whom Pygmalion later married.



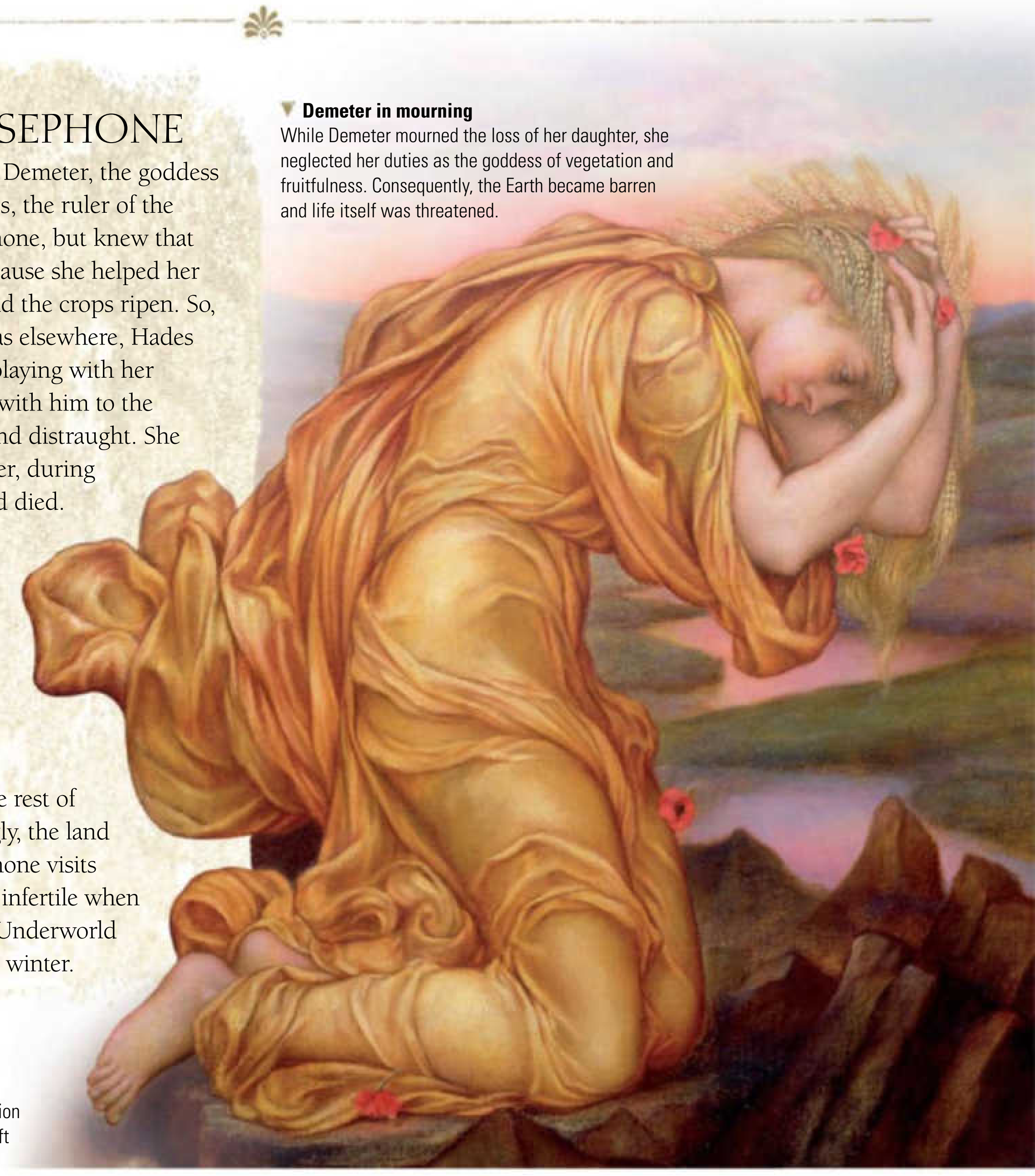
Pygmalion and Galatea

THE GREEK GODDESSES

The Greeks had many goddesses who played a variety of roles in their mythology. Some were primal, shadowy figures, such as Gaia (Mother Earth), who existed before most other deities, and Rhea, often seen as a Titaness, who was the mother of many of the Olympians. Others ruled over different aspects of the daily life of the people. Like most ancient cultures, the Greeks sought to explain natural phenomena by attributing them to the activities of the gods. Greek myths typically ascribe human emotions to their deities, hence there are numerous stories featuring the loves and rivalries of the Greek goddesses.

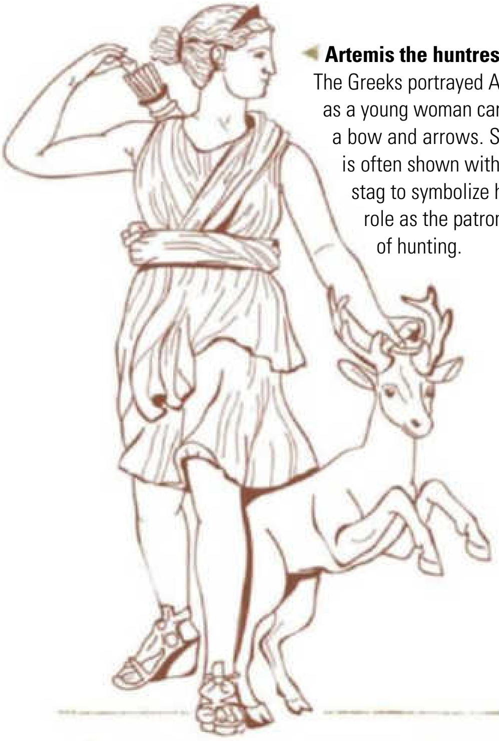
DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE

Persephone was the only daughter of Demeter, the goddess of the Earth, grain, and fertility. Hades, the ruler of the Underworld, fell in love with Persephone, but knew that Demeter would not part with her because she helped her mother in making the plants grow and the crops ripen. So, one day, when Demeter's attention was elsewhere, Hades snatched Persephone while she was playing with her companions, and dragged her down with him to the Underworld. Demeter was enraged and distraught. She went on a long search for her daughter, during which time all the crops withered and died. Zeus realized that if this state was allowed to continue, life on Earth would perish, since Demeter was also responsible for the cycle of the seasons. Finally, he persuaded Hades to agree to a compromise, whereby Persephone would be allowed to live on Earth with Demeter in spring and summer, but would have to spend the rest of the year with Hades. Accordingly, the land prospers whenever Persephone visits her mother, but becomes infertile when she goes back to the Underworld during autumn and winter.



▼ **Demeter in mourning**
While Demeter mourned the loss of her daughter, she neglected her duties as the goddess of vegetation and fruitfulness. Consequently, the Earth became barren and life itself was threatened.

◄ **The gift of corn**
The ancient Greeks believed that Demeter taught the art of cultivation to humans. Her most cherished gift was the crop of corn.



Artemis the huntress
The Greeks portrayed Artemis as a young woman carrying a bow and arrows. She is often shown with a stag to symbolize her role as the patroness of hunting.

ARTEMIS

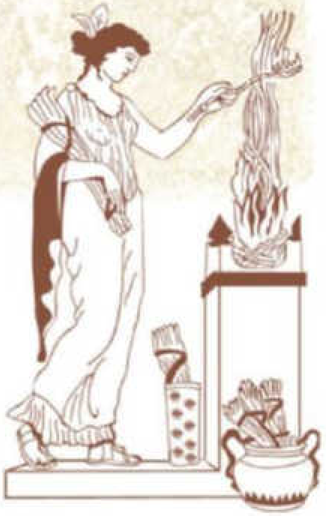
The goddess Artemis was the twin sister of Apollo and the daughter of Leto and Zeus. She was the patroness of hunting, and the protector of the weak. The deer and the cypress tree were sacred to her. Artemis was a virgin and devoted to the hunt, but she also used her weapons against her enemies. When the hunter Orion tried to rape one of her followers, Artemis killed him. When another hunter, Actaeon, spied on her while she was bathing, she turned him into a stag and he was killed by his own hounds.

Artemis with her family
Zeus and Leto had two children – Apollo, who became the god of music, and Artemis (far left), the goddess of the hunt.

HESTIA

The daughter of Cronus and Rhea, Hestia was the goddess of the hearth and domesticity. Unusually for an Olympian goddess, Hestia remained a virgin – in spite of the fact that both Poseidon and Apollo were in love with her. She had sworn an oath upon the head of Zeus that she would always be chaste and never marry. Another way in which she differed from the other Greek deities was that she did not travel. Instead, she lived her life on Mount Olympus, becoming the symbol of home and family. She had no throne, but was responsible for tending the sacred fire at Mount Olympus. Hestia represented domestic stability and the hearth was her altar. In every sacrifice, the first offering was made to Hestia.

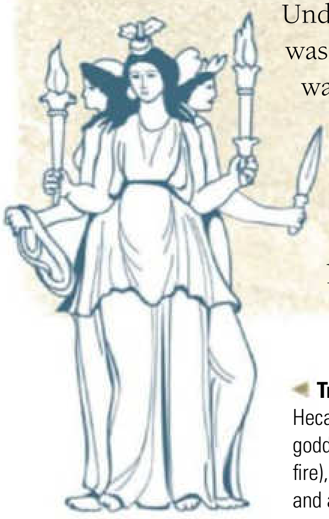
Mount Olympus
Hestia tended the fire on Mount Olympus. Since it was shrouded in clouds, the Greeks believed it to be the home of the gods.



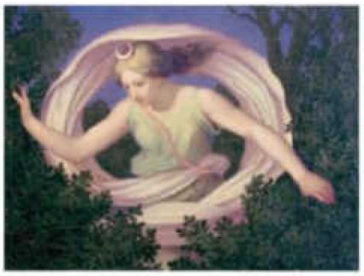
Hestia and the hearth
The Greeks made their domestic hearths into shrines where the goddess Hestia was worshipped.

HECATE

The goddess Hecate is a shadowy figure – some say her parents were Titans, some that she was a daughter of Zeus. Hecate had many different aspects. As the moon goddess, she travelled across the night sky in her chariot, casting her cold light across the whole cosmos. She was also worshipped as a goddess of the Underworld. In addition, as she was the goddess of childbirth, she was often invoked to ease the pain of labour. Crossroads were sacred to Hecate, and offerings of meat were often left by the ancient Greeks at places where three roads met.



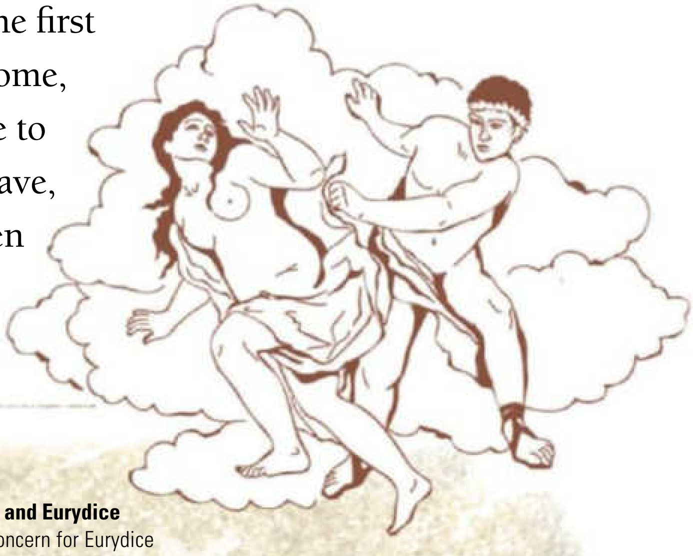
Triple Hecate
Hecate was sometimes portrayed as a triple goddess carrying a torch (symbolizing lunar fire), a serpent (representing immortality), and a knife (symbolic of midwifery).



Selene
The Greek moon goddess Selene was often confused with Hecate. She was usually depicted with a windblown veil resembling the arched canopy of the sky, and a half-moon on her head.

ORPHEUS IN THE UNDERWORLD

The hero Orpheus was famed for two major qualities. The first was his remarkable musicianship, which, according to some, he had learned from Apollo. With his music, he was able to charm gods and mortals alike. Orpheus was also very brave, and had accompanied Jason on his quest for the Golden Fleece. But his most daring adventure was his legendary journey to the Underworld.



Orpheus and Eurydice
Orpheus's concern for Eurydice made him disregard Hades' warning, and he paid the price as Eurydice was snatched from him.

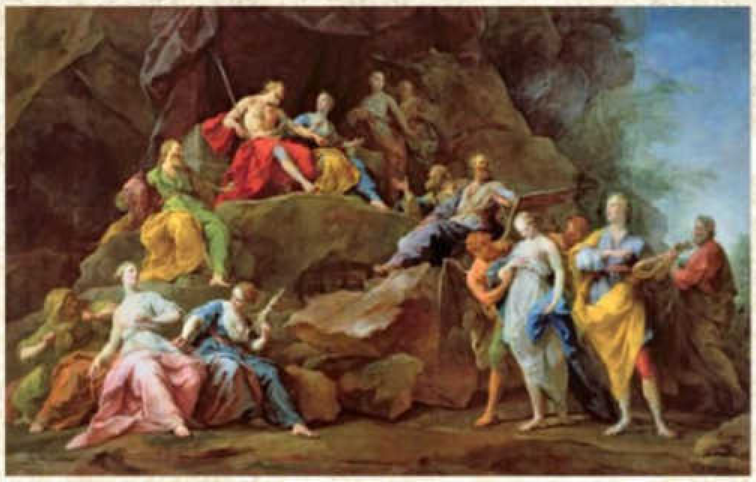
THE MYTH

The power of Orpheus's music was mirrored in his very mysterious origins, because it was not known for certain where he came from or who his parents were. Although it was rumoured that he was a son of Apollo, his real father was purportedly a man from Thrace – an area that many southern Greeks considered uncivilized. His mother was believed to be one of the nine Muses.

ORPHEUS AND HADES

When Orpheus's beloved wife, the nymph Eurydice, died from a snakebite, he decided to go to the Underworld to get her back. It was a journey from which virtually no mortal had ever returned. The great hero Heracles had made the journey and survived, but his strength was superhuman. Orpheus was not as strong, but he had his incredible musical skill. He sang and played the lyre so well that people believed he could move even inanimate objects.

After arriving in the Underworld, Orpheus played his lyre to Hades, the king of the dark realm, and his queen, Persephone. Hades was generally not moved by appeals from mere mortals, but Orpheus's eloquent music softened his heart and he listened to the musician's request. Hades decreed that Eurydice could accompany Orpheus back to Earth, but forbade him from looking at his wife on the way.



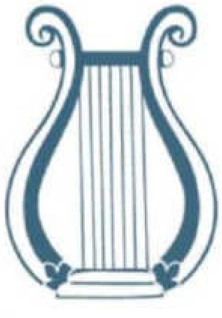
Orpheus in the Underworld
According to some versions of the myth, it was Persephone who was so moved by Orpheus's music that she asked Hades to let Eurydice leave with Orpheus.

THE RETURN JOURNEY

Orpheus and his wife began their journey and it went well initially, with the musician playing his lyre and the beautiful chords guiding Eurydice back through the darkness of the Underworld towards the light of the Earth. But Orpheus was concerned about his wife, and worried that Hades had not allowed her to follow him. Unable to resist himself, he took one fleeting glance at her. As soon as he looked back, Hades pounced on Eurydice and pulled her back into the Underworld. Orpheus had to continue homewards on his own, and was condemned to wander the Earth, lamenting his lost wife, and moving those who heard him to tears.

ORPHEUS AND HIS MUSIC

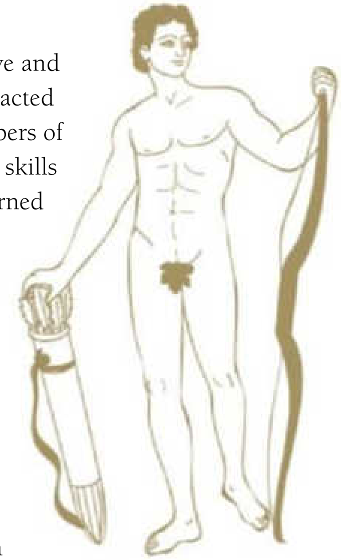
The beguiling beauty of Orpheus's music was famous. It was said that when he played his lyre or sang, rivers changed their courses and trees uprooted themselves to move closer so that they could hear the beautiful sounds more clearly. For the culture-loving Greeks, this musical ability gave Orpheus a special place in their mythology. But the beauty of his music was not always art for its own sake. For example, when Orpheus accompanied the Argonauts on their journey, his music saved his fellow adventurers by distracting them from the entrancing song of the Sirens.



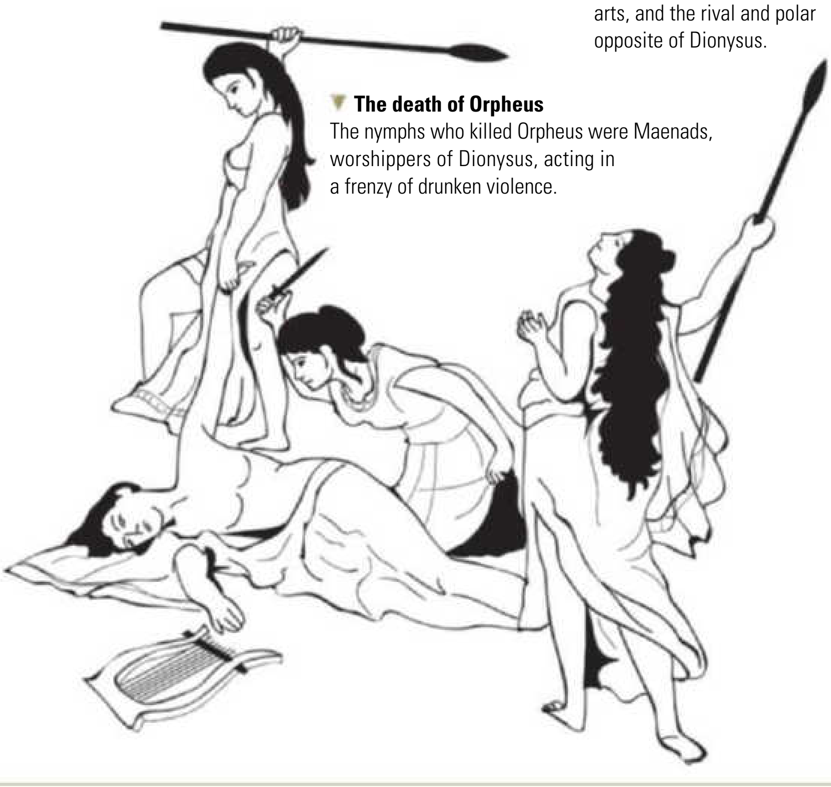
▲ **Greek lyre**
Musicians like Orpheus may have played a seven-stringed lyre (also called a *kithara*) with a wooden sounding board.

ORPHEUS‘S DEATH

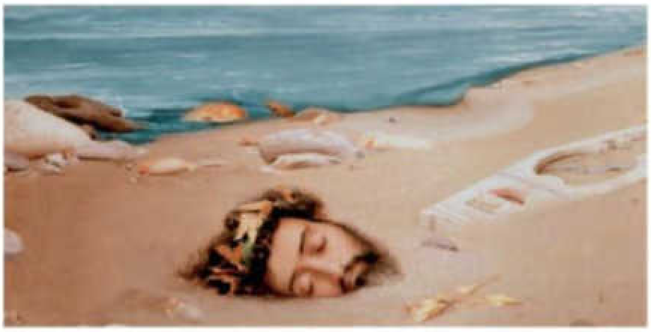
Later in his life, Orpheus retired to a cave and gave up the company of women. He attracted many male followers, who were worshippers of Apollo like him. He taught them musical skills and the hidden mysteries that he had learned as a result of his trip to the Underworld. Eurydice's fellow nymphs, worshippers of Dionysus, were already angry with Orpheus because of the way he had looked back in the Underworld and lost his wife. They were further enraged over his decision to forsake women and because of his devotion to Apollo. When they came upon Orpheus teaching his male followers, the nymphs attacked him and tore his body apart.



▲ **Apollo**
Orpheus was devoted to Apollo, who was the god of music, poetry, and the arts, and the rival and polar opposite of Dionysus.



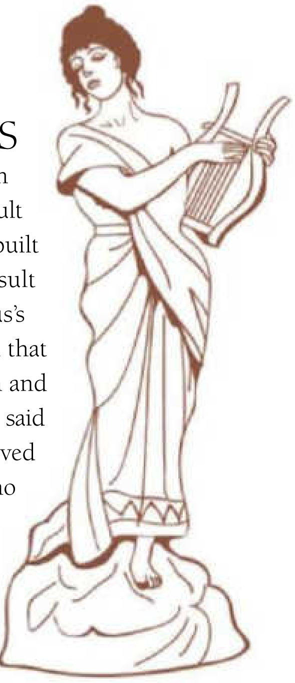
▼ **The death of Orpheus**
The nymphs who killed Orpheus were Maenads, worshippers of Dionysus, acting in a frenzy of drunken violence.



▲ **The head of Orpheus**
After Orpheus's death, his head floated down the River Hebros in Thrace and out to sea. When it reached Lesbos, still singing, it gave its musical and poetic gifts to the people of that island.

THE CULT OF ORPHEUS

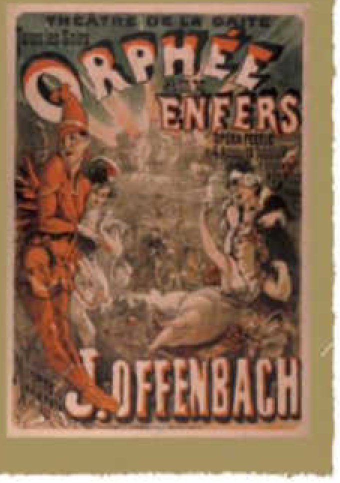
The wisdom and songs of Orpheus lived on after his death. He became the object of a cult that began on Lesbos, where a shrine was built at a place called Antissa for people to consult an oracle that supposedly relayed Orpheus's wisdom. The followers of the cult believed that they could cheat death by freely passing in and out of the Underworld. Orpheus's spirit was said to have inspired many famous poets who lived in Lesbos, notably Alcaeus and Sappho, who both flourished in the late 7th century BCE.



► **Sappho**
The lyric poet Sappho was the greatest female writer in antiquity. Her love poems, addressed to other women, have inspired poets and are still read today.

LATER INTERPRETATIONS

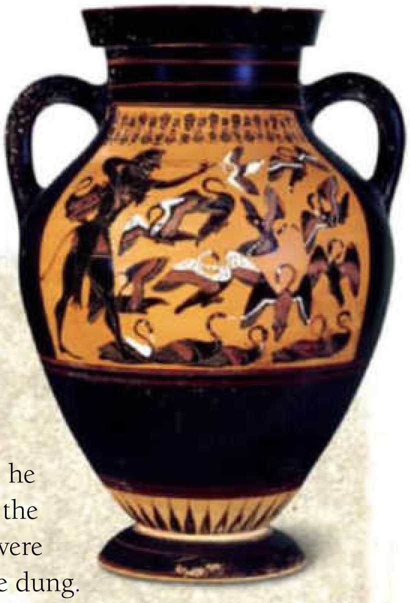
Orpheus's story is a popular Classical myth that has been retold many times, inspiring musicians, poets, and writers. Its musical content has also made it popular with composers of opera – Jacopo Peri's *Euridice* (1600), Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607), and Gluck's *Orfeo Ed Euridice* (1762) were all based on the story. Offenbach's comic opera, *Orphée aux Enfers* (1858), was also inspired by the myth, and was followed by a stage version and the film adaptation, *Orphée* (1949), by Jean Cocteau.



Poster for *Orphée aux Enfers*

THE LABOURS OF HERACLES

The hero Heracles, renowned for his great strength, was the son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene. Zeus's wife, Hera, was jealous of the affair and resentful towards Heracles, and she persecuted him throughout his life. The hero married Megara, daughter of King Creon of Thebes, but Hera made him go mad and kill his wife and children. To punish Heracles, King Eurystheus of Mycenae set him 12 apparently impossible tasks to accomplish.



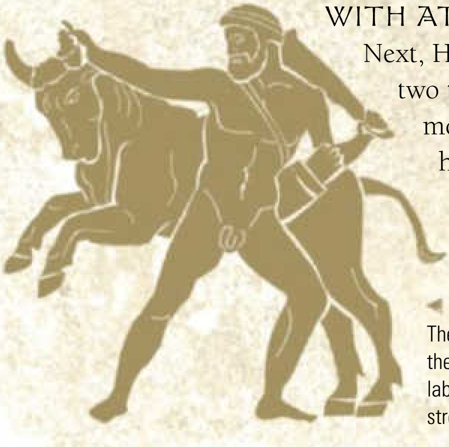
The Stymphalian birds
This vase shows Heracles shooting the Stymphalian birds with a sling, a more effective weapon than his club or bow.

THE MYTH

The labours imposed on Heracles by King Eurystheus involved slaying horrific monsters, bringing back trophies for the king, and other tasks, each of which was more difficult and sent the hero on a longer journey than the preceding one. The first labour was to kill the lion of Nemaea, not far from Mycenae. Heracles throttled the beast and skinned it, taking the creature's pelt as his cloak. The second labour was to slay the Hydra, a water monster with many heads that lived at Lerna. Heracles found that each time he cut off one of the creature's heads, two new ones grew. So he asked his helper, Iolaos, to cauterize the stumps, to stop the new heads growing. The third labour was to capture and bring back the Keryneian hind, a golden-horned deer consecrated to the goddess Artemis. This involved the hero in a long chase, but eventually he succeeded. The fourth task was to sieze the Erymanthian boar, a fierce creature that posed little problem for Heracles.

WITH ATHENA'S HELP

Next, Heracles undertook two tasks that required more ingenuity. He was helped in these by Athena, the goddess of wisdom. For the fifth labour, he was told to go to Elis and clean the stables of King Augeas, which were fouled with great heaps of horse dung. Heracles ingeniously cleared out the stables by diverting two rivers so that they washed the mess away. Then, for his sixth labour, Heracles had to visit Lake Stymphalis, northwest of Mycenae, to rid it of a plague of birds. He frightened the birds with castanets that Athena had lent him, then shot them as they flew into the air.



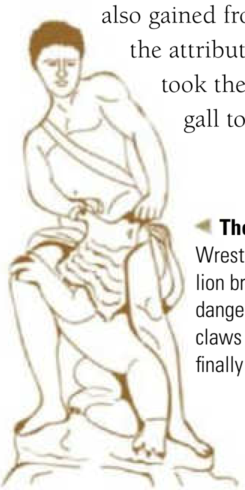
Heracles and the bull
The powerful bull of Crete was the target of Heracles's seventh labour. The hero needed all his strength to subdue the beast.

FARTHER AFIELD

For his subsequent labours, Heracles had to travel farther, leaving mainland Greece. His seventh labour was to capture a monstrous bull belonging to King Minos of Crete. After that he was sent north to Thrace, where he caught some man-eating mares that belonged to King Diomedes. The ninth, tenth, and eleventh labours required Heracles to steal items of great value. First he took the belt of Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, who lived to the south of the Black Sea. Next he led away the cattle of the giant Geryon, who dwelled in the far west. After this, he managed to obtain the golden apples of the Hesperides. But even these labours were straightforward compared with the twelfth: to go to the Underworld and bring back its guard dog, Cerberus. To the amazement of Eurystheus, Heracles succeeded in this seemingly impossible feat too.

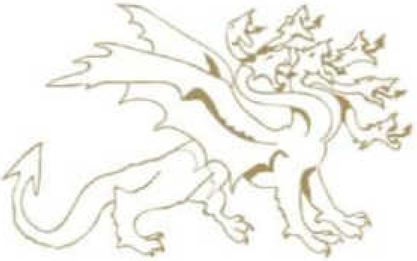
THE MONSTERS OF GREECE

Like other Greek heroes, such as Perseus, Heracles was tested during confrontations with numerous creatures, many of whom were monsters that would terrify most people. These creatures ranged from the Nemaean lion, an animal of supreme strength, to monstrous creatures – such as the three-headed dog, Cerberus – which seemed to come from the world of horror and nightmare. By overcoming them, Heracles was able to demonstrate both his superhuman strength and his exceptional bravery. He also gained from some of these combats by adopting the attributes of his adversaries – for example, he took the lion's skin as his cloak and the Hydra's gall to poison his arrowheads.

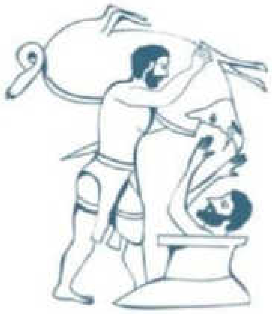


◀ **The Nemaean lion**
Wrestling the Nemaean lion brought Heracles into danger from the animal's claws and jaws, but he finally prevailed.

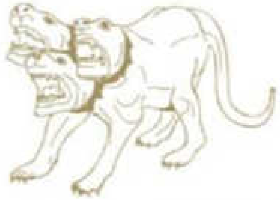
▼ **The Hydra**
Heracles dispatched the multi-headed Hydra with the help of Iolaos. As Heracles cut off each head, Iolaos cauterized the stumps.



▼ **The Erymanthian boar**
When Heracles brought the vicious boar to Eurystheus, the frightened king hid from the beast by climbing into a large storage jar.

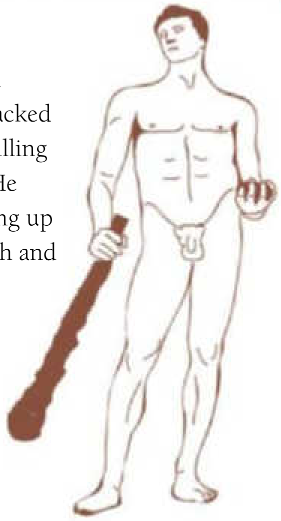


▼ **Cerberus**
After showing the terrifying guard dog of the Underworld to Eurystheus, Heracles returned the creature to Hades, its master.



THE HERO'S CLUB

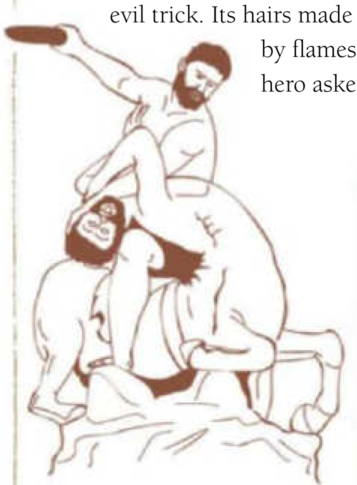
King Thespius, ruler of a kingdom called Thespiae, was troubled by a lion that attacked his cattle. Thespius's men had failed in killing the lion, so Heracles volunteered to try. He made himself an enormous club by tearing up an olive tree. He clubbed the lion to death and was allowed to sleep with all but one of Thespius's fifty daughters as a reward.



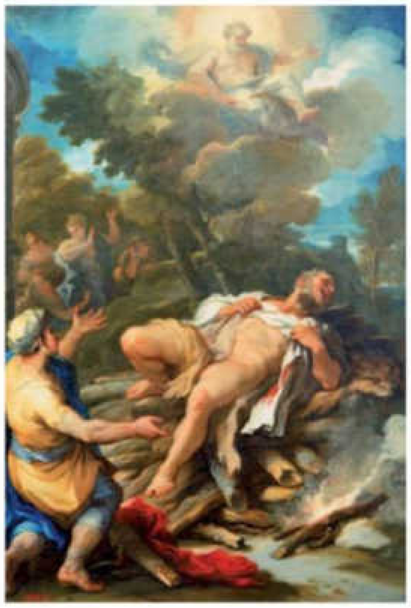
► **A formidable weapon**
The legendary club of Heracles, with which he overcame many opponents, was so heavy that only he could pick it up and wield it with ease.

HERACLES AND NESSUS

Heracles was travelling with his third wife, Deianira, when they met a centaur, called Nessus, who offered to carry Deianira across a river. When they were across the water and a safe distance from Heracles, Nessus raped Deianira, but Heracles saw what was happening and shot the centaur with one of his deadly arrows. As he died, Nessus told Deianira that if she wove Heracles a shirt from the hairs on his back, the wearer would never leave her for another woman. Some time later, Deianira suspected her husband's fidelity, and gave him the shirt to wear. But when Heracles put the shirt on, he discovered it was an evil trick. Its hairs made his skin blister and burn as if attacked by flames. In agony and begging for death, the hero asked to be put on his funeral pyre.



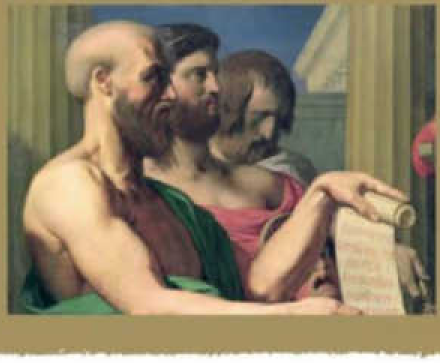
▲ **Heracles fighting the centaur**
The centaur Nessus had once been defeated in a fight with Heracles, and longed for revenge.



► **On his funeral pyre**
As the smoke from Heracles's pyre reached the heavens, Zeus saw his agony. He drew him up to Olympus and made him a god.

THE CHARACTER OF HERACLES

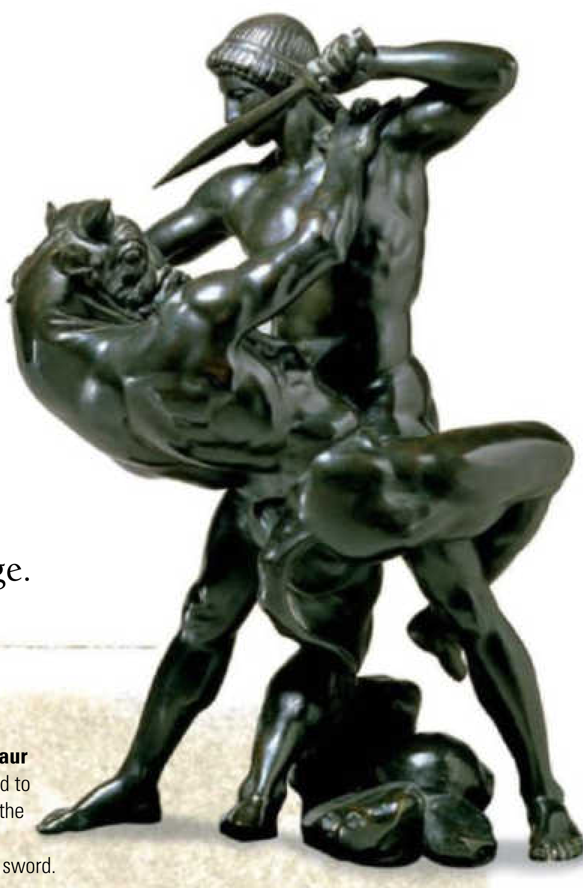
First and foremost, Heracles is a hero, a figure of incredible strength and outstanding bravery. But ancient Greek writers treat his character in different ways according to the parts of his story they are narrating. For example, in *The Children of Heracles*, Euripides portrays him as the tragic figure who kills his own children, but in another play, *Alcestis*, he gets comically drunk. Sophocles deals with the hero's relationship with his wife, Deianira, and other writers concentrate on his heroic adventures.



The dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides

THESEUS AND THE MINOTAUR

The Minotaur was a monstrous flesh-eating creature, half man, half bull. Minos, the King of Crete, kept it imprisoned in a labyrinth near his palace. According to a treaty between Minos and Aegeus, the King of Athens, 14 young people had to be sent every year from Athens to be devoured by it. But the Greek hero Theseus resolved to kill the creature and put an end to the carnage.



Theseus kills the Minotaur The Minotaur almost managed to defeat Theseus in battle, but the hero fought courageously and stabbed the monster with his sword.

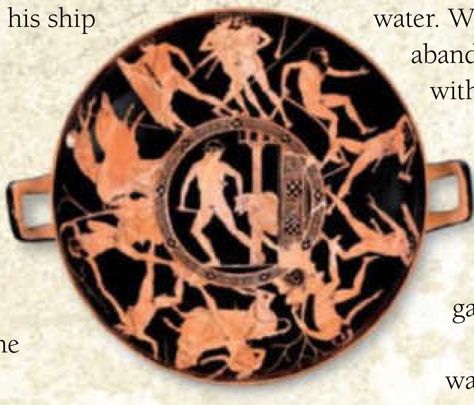
THE MYTH

The sea god Poseidon once gave a white bull, known as the Cretan Bull, to King Minos. However, when the king decided to keep the beast rather than sacrificing it, Poseidon was angered. He asked Aphrodite, the goddess of love, to make Minos's wife, Pasiphae, fall in love with the bull as punishment. This union produced a beast called the Minotaur, which had a monstrous appetite for human flesh.

King Minos wanted to avenge the death of his son at the hands of the Athenians. He waged a war on King Aegeus of Athens and won. As compensation, he demanded that 14 young people be sent from Athens each year to feed the Minotaur. Aegeus's son, Theseus, decided to go to Crete as one of the ill-fated people, and kill the beast. The ship carrying Theseus and the other victims set sail from Athens with black sails, and the hero promised his father that he would return with white sails hoisted on his ship if he succeeded in killing the Minotaur.

THESEUS ON CRETE

When the Athenians arrived at Crete, Minos's daughter, Ariadne, saw Theseus and fell in love with him. She knew that Theseus would need help in finding his way out of the impenetrable labyrinth, once he had slain the creature. So Ariadne gave him a spindle wound with woollen thread. As Theseus made his way into the labyrinth, he unwound the thread behind him, so that it would mark his winding path and show him how to exit the labyrinth.



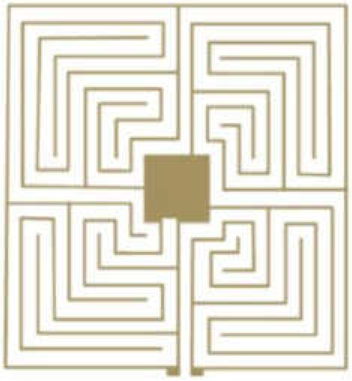
Leaving the labyrinth The central portion of this vessel from Greece shows Theseus dragging his dead victim out of its prison as he retraces his steps through the labyrinth using Ariadne's thread.

In the middle of the labyrinth, Theseus confronted the beast and killed it with a blow from his father's golden sword. He then retraced his steps with the body of the Minotaur by following Ariadne's thread, until he finally emerged from the entrance to the maze. His fellow Athenians rejoiced when they saw that Theseus had been victorious and quickly ran to their ship to set sail for home, Theseus taking Ariadne with him. In the excitement, they forgot to hoist the white sails to signal Theseus's success.

TRAGIC ENDINGS

On the way home, they called at the island of Naxos for water. When they returned to the ship, Theseus abandoned Ariadne on the island, sailing away without her. Some say that he did this since he already had a wife at home; others that Dionysus spotted Ariadne on the island, fell in love with her, and put a spell on Theseus, making him forget her. After marrying Ariadne, Dionysus gave her a crown made of seven stars.

As the ship approached Athens, Aegeus was watching anxiously for his son from a cliff-top. He saw the black sails from afar and assumed that Theseus had been killed. Overcome with grief, he flung himself into the sea, never to know of his son's success.



Ancient labyrinth
Unlike the puzzle-mazes seen in European gardens, which have many alternative routes, most ancient labyrinths had only one route, which led to the centre.

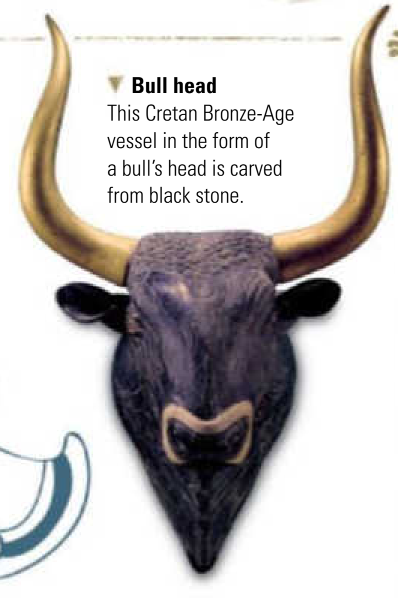
THE LABYRINTH

King Minos ordered the building of the labyrinth as a prison for the Minotaur. He entrusted the design of the labyrinth to the master-craftsman Daedalus, who was famous as an inventor – he was said to have invented sailing boats and sharp underwater rams that made the Cretan ships unbeatable in battle. His labyrinth became a byword in the ancient world for complexity and impenetrability. The story of the labyrinth seems to combine two ideas – the real palace at Knossos, Crete, which has hundreds of rooms and appears impenetrable; and drawings of mazes found on ancient carvings and coins.

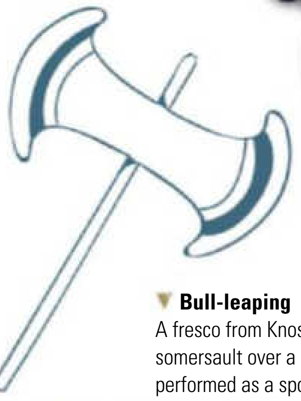
IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LABYRINTH, THESEUS KILLED THE BEAST WITH A BLOW OF HIS GOLDEN SWORD.

THE CRETAN BULL CULT

The bull plays a central part in the myths surrounding Crete – the creature that fathered the Minotaur had been sent to Minos by the sea god Poseidon as a confirmation of the king's right to rule on the island. Many ancient images of bulls have been found on Crete, so the animals seem to have been important in the customs and beliefs of the real islanders, too.

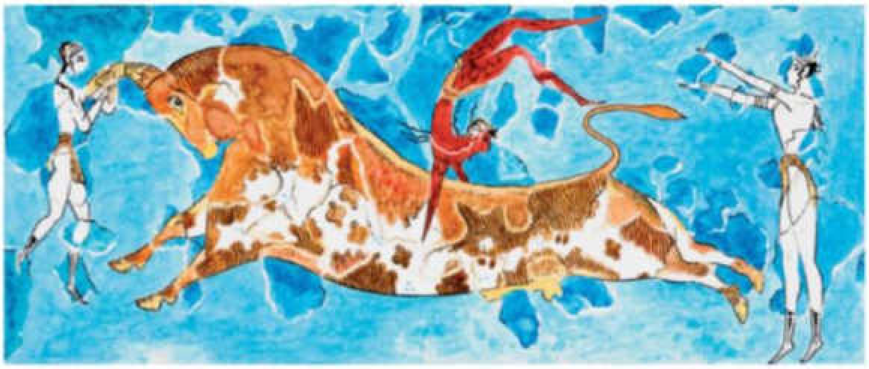


Bull head
This Cretan Bronze-Age vessel in the form of a bull's head is carved from black stone.



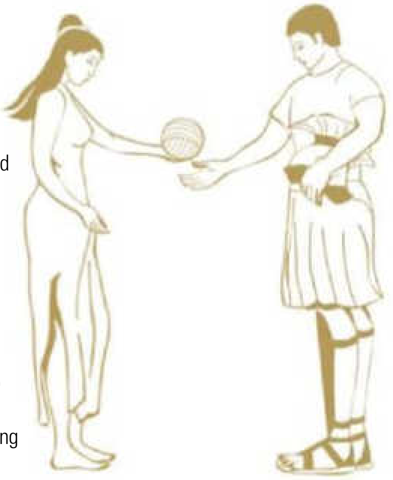
Double-headed axe
Two-headed axes are a common feature in Cretan art. Experts believe they are based on weapons used for sacrificing animals, a ritual of the bull cult.

Bull-leaping
A fresco from Knossos shows a young man turning a somersault over a bull's back. This feat was perhaps performed as a sport or had some ritual significance.

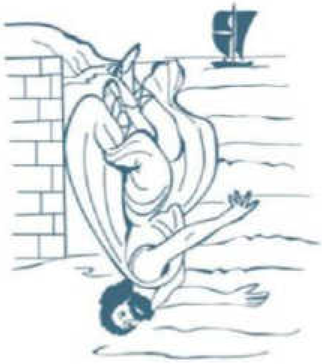


KEY CHARACTERS

The myth of Theseus and the Minotaur contains a varied cast of characters, most of whom are people who mean well but meet tragic ends. Ariadne's abandonment and Aegeus's suicide come about because they play minor roles in a larger drama – the career of the hero Theseus. The lives of the characters are driven more by destiny than by personal choices or their individual traits.



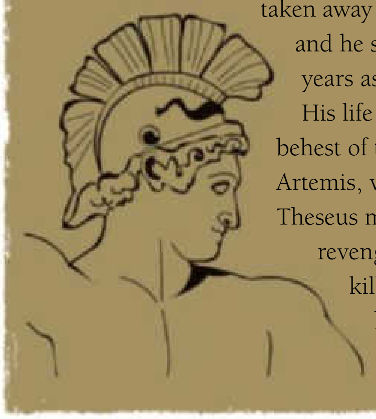
Ariadne
Ariadne had begged Daedalus to help her ensure Theseus's safe return from the labyrinth. He gave her a magical ball of thread, which she handed over to Theseus to find his way back after killing the Minotaur.



Aegeus
When Aegeus saw the black sails of the returning ship, he was convinced that his son was dead. In despair, he threw himself off the cliff. The sea in which he drowned has been known as the Aegean Sea ever since.

THESEUS

After becoming the King of Athens following the death of his father, Theseus embarked on a long trip to the Underworld with his friend Pirithous. On his return, Theseus's throne was taken away from him, and he spent his last years as a beggar. His life ended at the behest of the goddess Artemis, who had Theseus murdered in revenge for his killing Antiope, her follower.



Theseus

BELLEROPHON AND PEGASUS

Like most Greek heroes, Bellerophon was given a seemingly impossible task – killing a monster called the Chimaera. With divine assistance and the aid of the fabulous flying horse, Pegasus, Bellerophon succeeded, but his triumph gave him an inflated view of his own status. He overreached himself when he used the horse's flying ability to try to visit the gods at Mount Olympus. The gods saw this act as supremely presumptuous. Although Bellerophon was a hero, he did not have the rank of a god, and so was punished.

THE MYTH

Bellerophon was a young hero who had unintentionally killed a man in his home city of Corinth and was banished. He was accepted at Tiryns, which was ruled by Proetus, but the king's wife, Stheneboia, fell in love with him. When Bellerophon rejected her advances, the queen vengefully accused the young man of trying to seduce her. Proetus believed his wife's false words, and so Bellerophon found himself banished again. This time, Proetus sent him to Lycia, the kingdom of Stheneboia's father, Iobates. Proetus asked Iobates to kill Bellerophon, but Iobates did not want to murder a guest. Instead, he sent Bellerophon on an apparently vain quest to kill the monstrous Chimaera, a creature that was part serpent, part goat, and part lion.

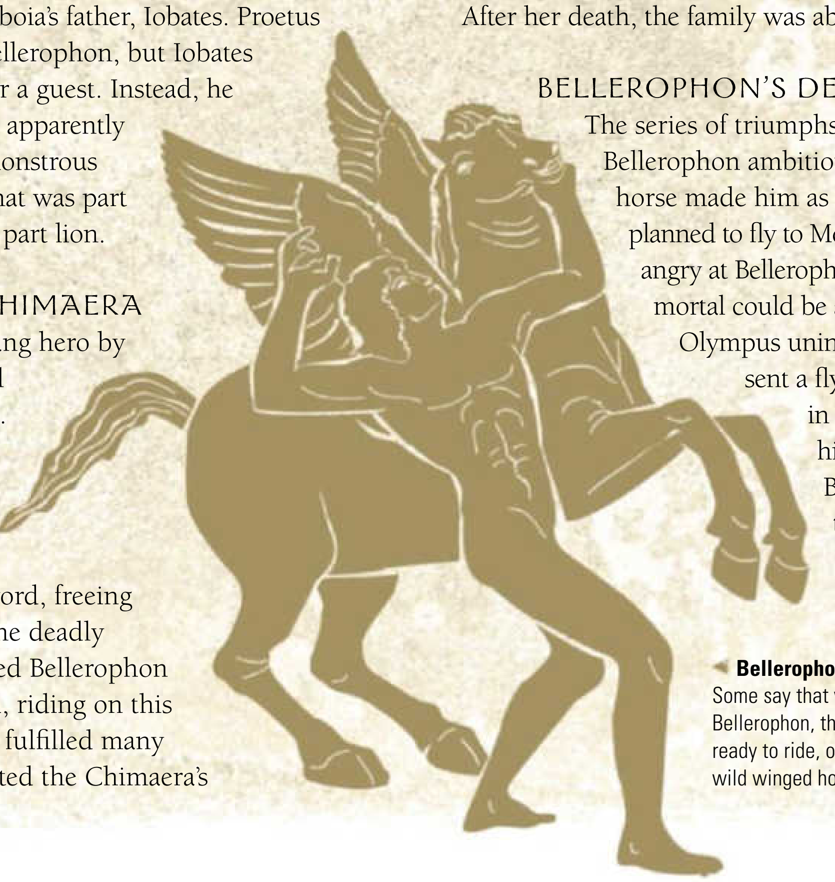
HUNTING THE CHIMAERA

Athena helped the young hero by giving him the magical winged horse, Pegasus. With his assistance, Bellerophon was able to swoop down on the monster and dispatch it with his sword, freeing Iobates's kingdom of the deadly menace. Athena allowed Bellerophon to retain the horse and, riding on this remarkable mount, he fulfilled many other quests. He defeated the Chimaera's father, killed some giants who threatened Iobates's kingdom, and repelled a force of Amazons – female warriors who were famous for fighting like men.

Iobates was impressed with Bellerophon and the two became friends – the king even offered the hero his daughter in marriage. Soon the spiteful Stheneboia died. Some myths claim she committed suicide in despair when Bellerophon married, others say Bellerophon killed her in fury when he discovered that she had accused him of trying to seduce her. After her death, the family was able to live in peace.

BELLEROPHON'S DEMISE

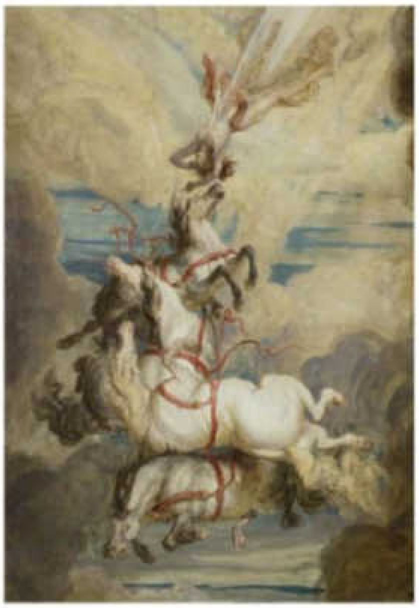
The series of triumphs on Pegasus made Bellerophon ambitious. He decided that the horse made him as powerful as a god, so he planned to fly to Mount Olympus. Zeus became angry at Bellerophon's presumption, since no mortal could be allowed to come to Mount Olympus uninvited. The king of the gods sent a fly to sting the horse midway in his flight. Pegasus reared on his hindlegs in pain, sending Bellerophon tumbling all the way to Earth, where he met his death.



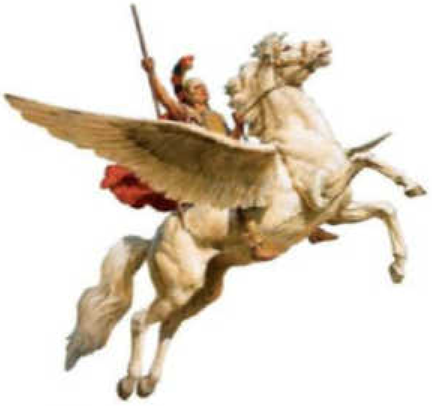
Bellerophon and Pegasus
Some say that when Athena brought Pegasus to Bellerophon, the horse was already broken in and ready to ride, others that Bellerephon found the wild winged horse and had to tame him first.

OVERREACHERS

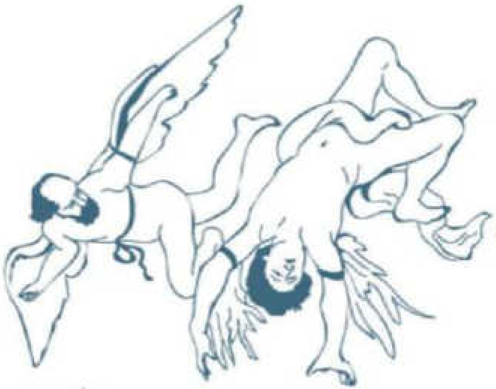
In Classical mythology there is a clear hierarchy, with gods at the top, mortals below, and animals lower still. Heroes, however, occupied an ambiguous place in this framework – they were mortals, but often had one divine parent. This sometimes made them into overreachers – beings who aspired to a higher status than their allotted position. Their ambition drove them to great heights but finally brought them to grief. Bellerophon, Icarus, and Phaeton were all heroes who flew too high and paid the price.



Phaeton
Phaeton was killed when he insisted on driving the chariot of his father Helios, the sun god. He lost control of the horses and fell to Earth.



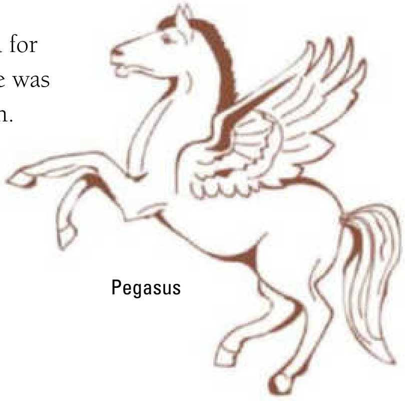
Bellerophon
Although he looked invincible on Pegasus, Bellerophon incurred the wrath of Zeus with his arrogance and fell to Earth when he tried to fly too high.



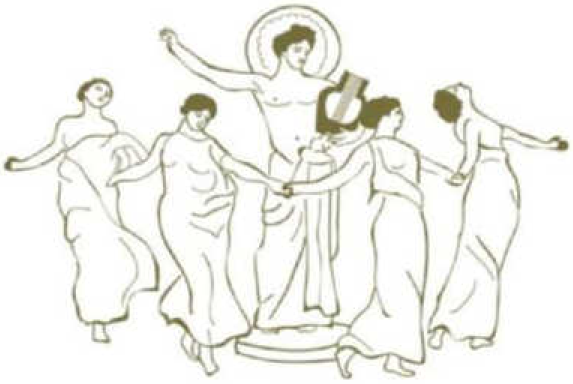
Daedalus and Icarus
The great craftsman Daedalus made wings so he and his son, Icarus, could fly. But Icarus flew too close to the sun and his waxen wings melted.

PEGASUS

The name Pegasus is related to the Greek word for “spring”, and one myth of his birth says that he was born in the far west at the springs of the Ocean. After his adventures with Bellerophon he flew back to Mount Olympus, where he caused another spring, Hippocrene (“horse spring”) to flow from Mount Helicon during a singing contest involving the Muses.



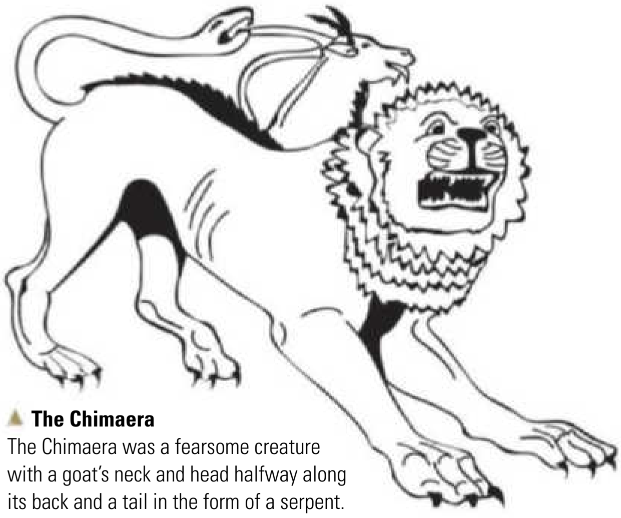
Pegasus



The Muses
Mount Helicon swelled in pleasure when the Muses sang. Pegasus kicked the mountain to make it shrink again; the spring called Hippocrene gushed from the spot where he had kicked the ground.

THE CHIMAERA

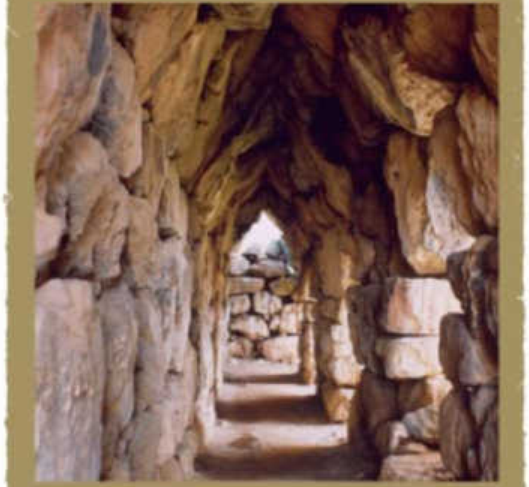
The child of two monsters, the man-dragon Typhon and the woman-serpent Echidna, the Chimaera was one of the most bizarre hybrids of Classical mythology. It was terrifying both because of its strange compound form, and because it breathed fire from its mouth. When it raided Iobates’s kingdom, the king sent his men after it, but they were all burned by the creature’s scorching breath.



The Chimaera
The Chimaera was a fearsome creature with a goat’s neck and head halfway along its back and a tail in the form of a serpent.

TIRYNS

Proetus’s kingdom, Tiryns, is a real place on mainland Greece. It is the site of a ruined citadel dating to the 2nd millennium BCE and, therefore, was already in existence when the Greek myths reached their mature form about 1,000 years later. The ancient buildings of Tiryns are constructed with stones so large that in ancient times people thought they had been built by giants or Cyclopes.



A Cyclopean tunnel at Tiryns

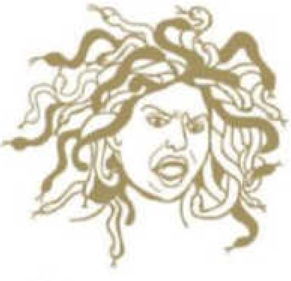
THE EXPLOITS OF PERSEUS

Perseus – one of the greatest Greek heroes – was the son of Zeus and Danaë, the daughter of Acrisius, the King of Argos. An oracle had once predicted that Acrisius would be killed by his daughter's son. To prevent the oracle's warning from coming true, he imprisoned his daughter and grandson, Perseus, in a wooden chest and threw it into the sea. The chest reached the island of Seriphos, where Perseus and his mother were rescued by the king, Polydectes, who brought him up. Many years later, Polydectes would be the one to send Perseus on his most perilous journey – to retrieve the head of the Gorgon Medusa.

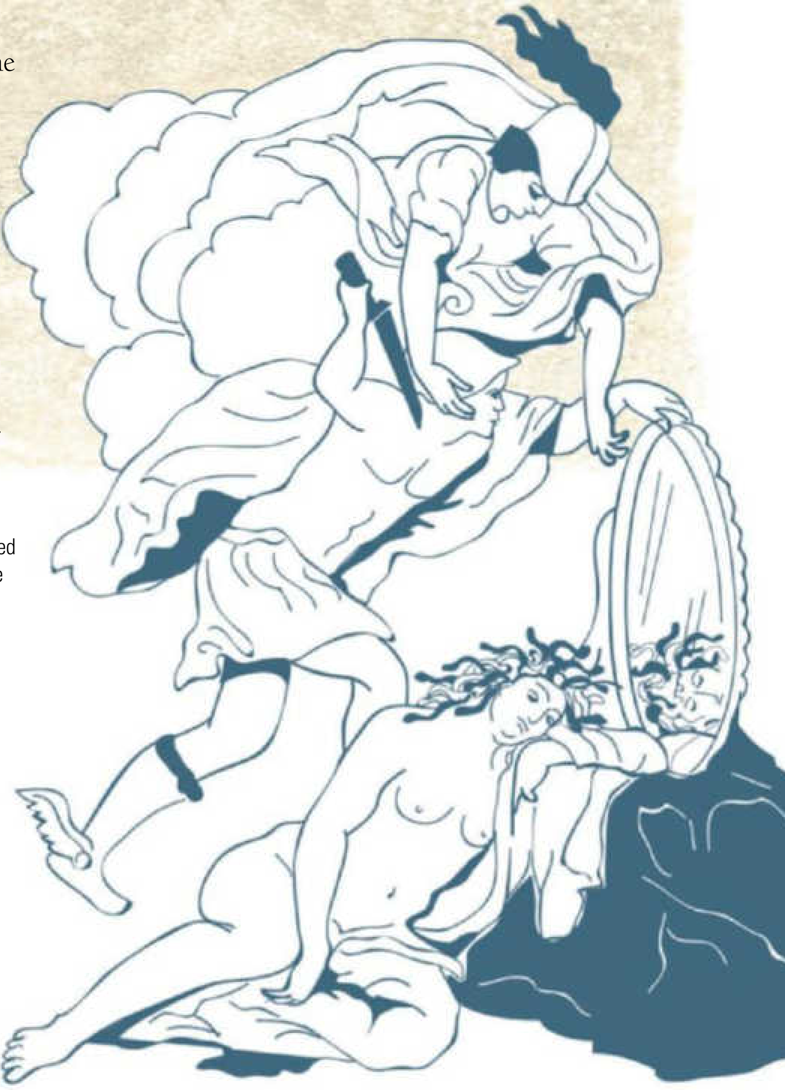
THE SLAYING OF MEDUSA

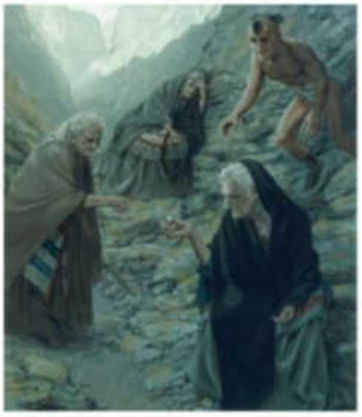
Perseus rashly boasted to Polydectes that he would behead one of the three monstrous Gorgons. When Polydectes held him to his boast, Perseus decided to slay Medusa, a Gorgon who could turn men to stone with her gaze. Divine assistance was needed for Perseus to complete his task, so the deities of Mount Olympus lent Perseus several objects that helped him succeed. He used Hermes's winged sandals to fly to the place where Medusa lived, and Hades's helmet of invisibility to gain access to her dwelling. With Athena's shield, polished like a mirror, he approached the Gorgon, avoiding her direct gaze. And with Hephaestus's diamond sword, he chopped off Medusa's head, thus making good his boast.

▼ **Head of Medusa**
Like the other Gorgons, Medusa was a female monster with snakes for hair. However, she was the only mortal among the Gorgons.



► **Medusa meets her death**
Medusa's deadly glance only worked when she looked at her victims directly, so Athena helped Perseus use her shield as a mirror as he took aim with his sword.

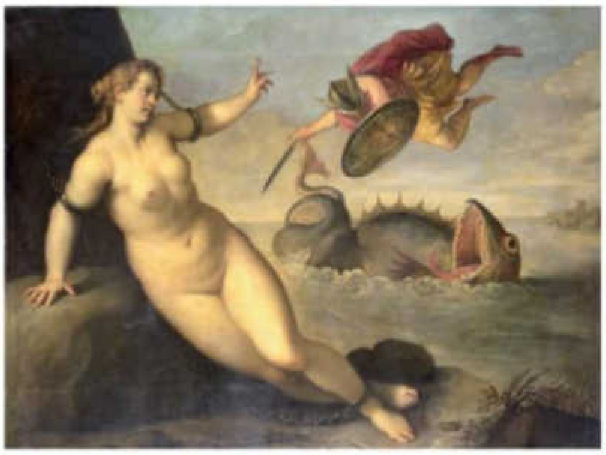




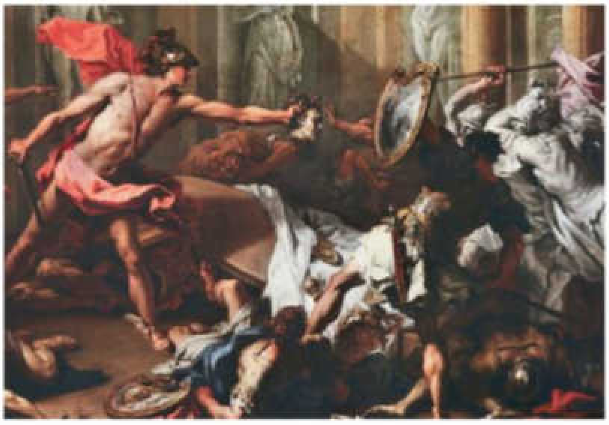
► **The three Graeae**
Wearing Hades's helmet, Perseus crept past the Graeae, three sisters with one eye and one tooth between them, who guarded the cave of the Gorgons.

THE RESCUE OF ANDROMEDA

Some say the winged horse Pegasus grew from Medusa's blood after Perseus had slain the Gorgon, and he left for home on this magical steed. As he flew, he saw a woman chained to some rocks on the Phoenician coast. She was Andromeda, the daughter of Cepheus, the King of Ethiopia. His wife, Cassiopeia, had boasted that Andromeda was more beautiful than the sea nymphs. Furious at this insult, the god Poseidon had sent a sea monster to terrorize Ethiopia; the beast would only be satisfied with the sacrifice of Cassiopeia's daughter. Perseus swooped down and killed the monster, rescuing Andromeda. He asked for her hand in marriage but when her parents refused, Perseus showed them Medusa's head, turning them to stone, and left with Andromeda.



Perseus and Andromeda
This painting of the rescue of Andromeda by Perseus shows the hero still flying on the winged sandals of Hermes. Some versions of the story have him riding across the sky on the winged steed, Pegasus.



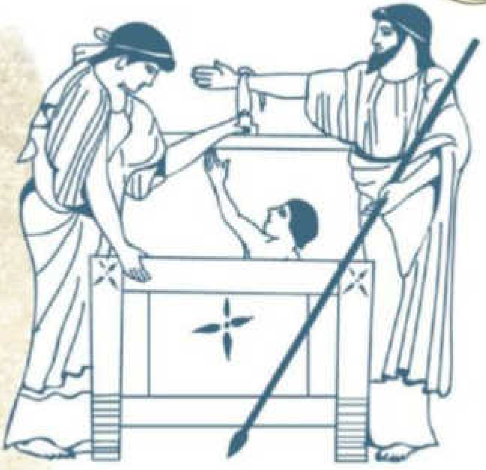
Turned to stone
Perseus confronted Polydectes with Medusa's head just as the king was about to force Danaë to submit to his demands. The Gorgon's gaze was enough to petrify Polydectes and his men instantly where they stood.

THE PETRIFICATION OF POLYDECTES

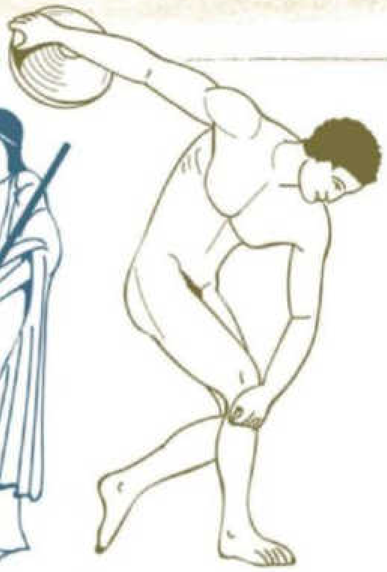
After his adventures with the Gorgon and the sea monster, Perseus finally returned home to the island of Seriphos. King Polydectes had fallen in love with Perseus's mother, Danaë, and had been trying to persuade her to marry him. He had sent Perseus away in the first place for this very purpose. Danaë hid herself in the temple of Athena and Polydectes laid siege to the building. Enraged by what he saw on his arrival, Perseus revealed Medusa's head to the king and his soldiers, turning them to stone. Perseus then returned the gifts that the gods had loaned to him, and gave Medusa's head to Athena, who attached it to the front of her shield.

THE DEATH OF ACRISIUS

Perseus was going to return to his homeland of Argos, but he heard about the oracle that had predicted that Danaë's son would kill his own grandfather, and so he decided to stay away. He travelled instead to Pelasgiotis (or according to some accounts, Larissa) in Thessaly, where the local king, Teutamides, was holding funeral games for his recently deceased father. Perseus was keen to compete in the games, especially in the discus, which was his favourite event. But when he took his throw, the discus went astray, hitting and killing one of the men watching. Unfortunately, the victim turned out to be Perseus's grandfather, Acrisius.



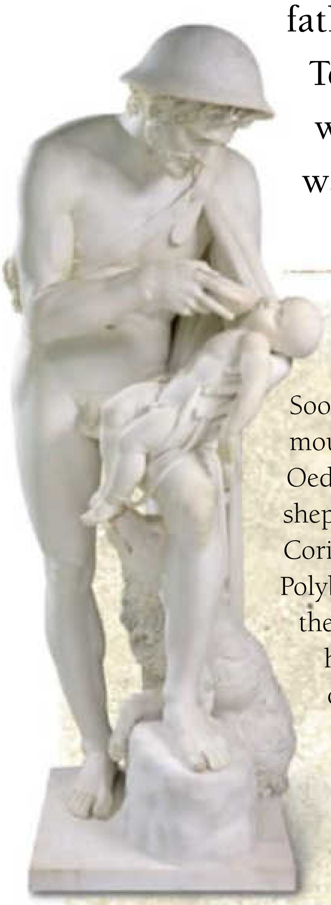
Abandonment of Danaë and Perseus
Acrisius's death had been foretold in a prophecy, which led him to put his daughter and grandson in a chest and throw it in the sea.



Discus thrower
Perseus was fond of discus throwing, which became a very popular sport in the ancient Greek Olympic games.

OEDIPUS

Laius and Jocasta, the King and Queen of the city of Thebes, were told by the oracle at Delphi that their son would kill his father and marry his mother. Terrified by the prophecy, when their son, Oedipus, was born, they abandoned the child on a mountain and left him to die. So began one of the most tragic tales in all Classical mythology. By the end of the story, the entire family was destroyed, victims of fate and the impossibility of avoiding it. Oedipus became the archetypal tragic hero, trying to live well but thwarted by destiny.



The infant Oedipus
When the shepherds found Oedipus, they took him to their king and queen who were childless and longed for a son.

THE MYTH

Soon after he was abandoned on the mountainside by Laius and Jocasta, Oedipus was found by a group of shepherds who took him to the city of Corinth, where the king and queen, Polybus and Merope, brought him up as their own son. One day someone told him he was a foundling, so he went to the oracle at Delphi to find out the truth. But rather than enlightening him about his true parentage, the oracle told him he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Thinking the oracle had meant Polybus and Merope, Oedipus decided to leave Corinth and set off on a long journey. On the way he came to a crossroads where an old man in a chariot was travelling in the opposite direction. The man ordered Oedipus to get out of his way, offending him with his rudeness. The pair quarrelled and fought, and Oedipus ended up killing the man.

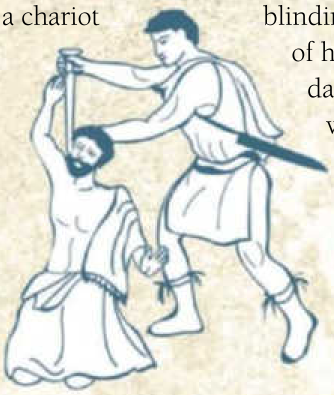
ANSWERING THE RIDDLE

Oedipus continued his journey and eventually arrived in Thebes, where a monster called the Sphinx was devouring the city's children and the king had mysteriously disappeared. Each day the Sphinx asked a baffling riddle and when nobody could answer it correctly, it grabbed another child and ate it up. Oedipus alone was able to guess the correct answer to the riddle and, when he did so, the Sphinx died, breaking its neck in a fit of rage. A triumphant Oedipus became the most popular man in Thebes, and having caught the attention of Queen Jocasta, a descendant of the founding family of the city, he married her.

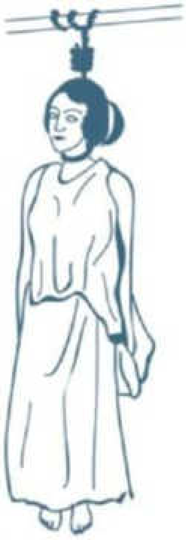
THE TRUTH REVEALED

For some years Oedipus and Jocasta enjoyed a happy marriage and had four children – daughters Antigone and Ismene, and sons Eteocles and Polynices. But after this period of contentment, Oedipus discovered the horrifying truth about his life when the prophet Tiresias revealed what had happened. The chariot rider that Oedipus killed at the crossroads was his true father, Laius, and the queen he had married in Thebes was his own mother, Jocasta. The queen killed herself in despair over what had happened, and Oedipus took a pin from her dress to stab his eyes, blinding himself. He left Thebes to spend the rest of his life as a wanderer, comforted only by his daughter Antigone, the one member of his family who had not rejected him for his deeds.

After many years of travelling as a blind beggar, Oedipus reached the city of Colonus, on the edge of Athens, where the oracle had said he would die. Here, the King of Athens, Theseus, welcomed him. However, Oedipus's sons wanted him to return to Thebes, convinced that his return would bring good fortune to the city. Oedipus ignored their demands and walked into the sacred grove at Colonus, disappearing from view and starting his last journey – to the Underworld.



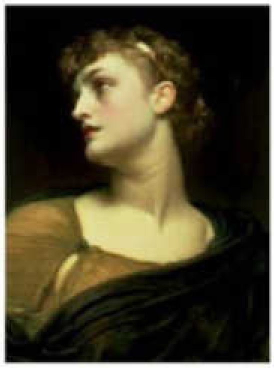
The death of Laius
The fatal meeting of Oedipus and Laius took place at a crossroads not far from Delphi. There, the words of the oracle were partly fulfilled.



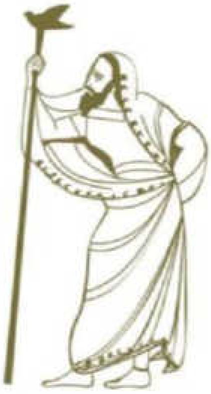
Jocasta
Queen Jocasta hung herself in anguish on realizing that she had mistakenly married her own son, Oedipus.

THE FAMILY OF OEDIPUS

As a royal dynasty, Oedipus's family were closely involved with the politics of their city, Thebes. When Oedipus blinded himself and left the city, Jocasta's brother, Creon, took over the throne until Oedipus's sons, Eteocles and Polynices, were old enough to rule. But the brothers fought and killed each other, and Creon returned to the throne. He tried to rule for the good of the city but was known for his ruthlessness. He did not even spare Antigone, who was betrothed to his son, Haemon, and confined her in a cave to die for supporting her brother Polynices against his wishes.



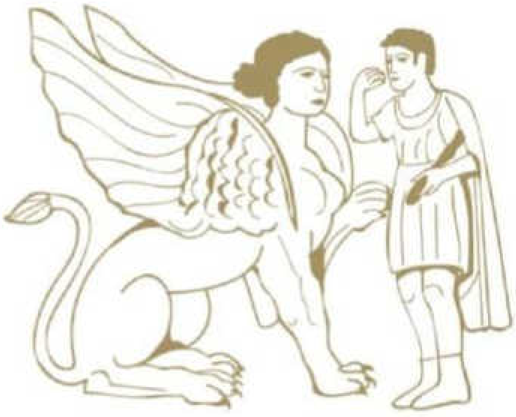
Antigone
Oedipus's daughter Antigone supported her father and stood up for her brother, Polynices, after his rebellion (*see right*).



Creon
Trying to deal firmly with the rows and tragedies in his family, Creon acted violently and became the archetype of the cruel ruler.

THE RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX

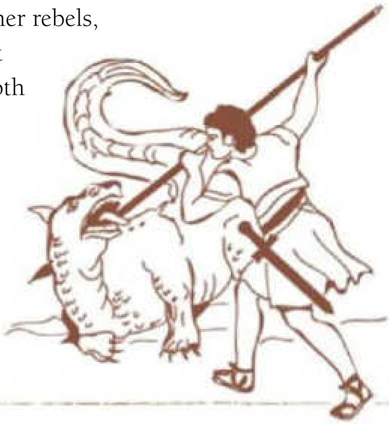
The puzzle posed by the Sphinx to the people of Thebes is now a familiar riddle, but it baffled everyone when they first heard it. In its most famous form, the riddle is: "What goes on four legs in the morning, two legs in the daytime, and three legs at night?" Oedipus rightly guessed that the answer was a man, who crawls on four limbs as a baby, walks upright on two legs as an adult, and uses a stick, or third leg, in old age.



The sphinx
Sphinxes take various forms in the ancient world, but the Greek Sphinx had the head of a woman, the body and legs of a lion, and the wings of a bird.

THEBES

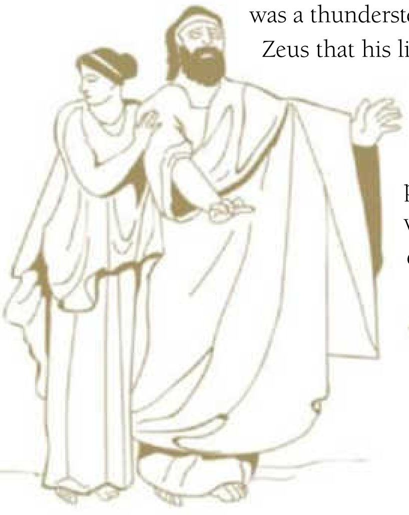
Although it is a family tragedy, the story of Oedipus and his sons is intimately bound with the history of their city, Thebes, in Boeotia, whose ruling family traced its ancestry back to a magical event in the life of the hero Cadmus, the founder of Thebes. Much later, when Polynices was ousted by his brother Eteocles, he fled to Argos seeking help from its king, Adrastus. Together, they started a war with five other rebels, collectively known as the "Seven Against Thebes". Their army was slaughtered, both brothers were killed, and the noble line begun by Cadmus came to an end.



Cadmus slaying the dragon
Cadmus killed a dragon that lived on the plains of Thebes and planted its teeth in the ground. From the monster's teeth grew an army of men who became the ancestors of the Thebans.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

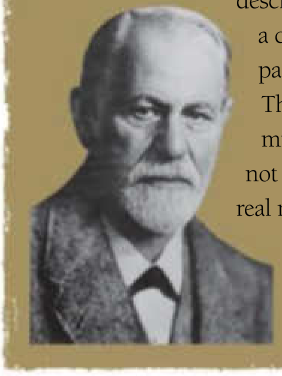
The oracle had told Oedipus that he would die in a place sacred to the Furies. Colonus was such a place; it was also special because it was the location of one of the entrances to the Underworld. After Oedipus came to Colonus, there was a thunderstorm, which he thought was a sign from Zeus that his life was coming to an end. It was from here that, ignoring the demands of the Thebans, Oedipus passed below the Earth to the next world. The Greek playwright Sophocles (496–406 BCE) was born in the area and described these events in his play *Oedipus at Colonus*.



Oedipus as a blind beggar
In his blind wanderings, Oedipus was guided by his daughter Antigone, the only member of his family who remained faithful to him.

FREUD AND OEDIPUS

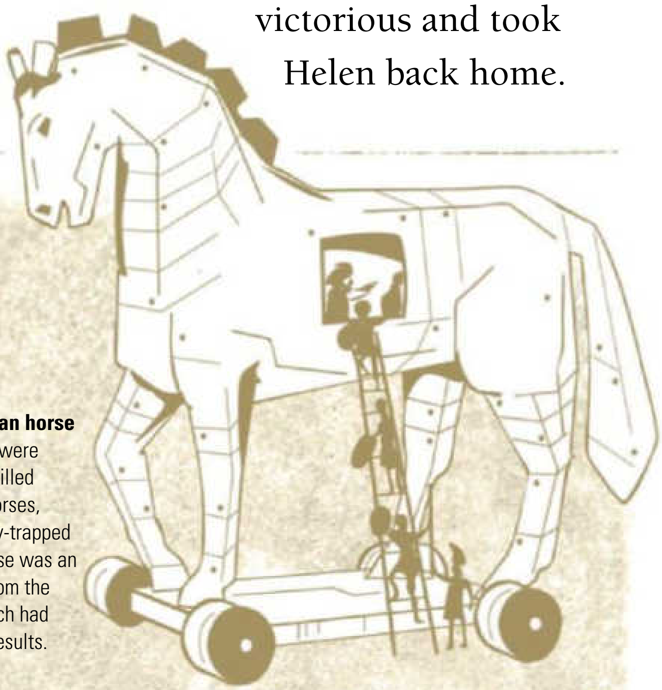
The pioneering psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) has been linked with the Oedipus myth ever since he coined the term "Oedipus complex" to describe the sexual obsession of a child (usually male) with the parent of the opposite sex. The phrase is somewhat misleading, as Oedipus did not know that Jocasta was his real mother. It has been widely used in both psychology and literary studies.



Sigmund Freud

THE TROJAN WAR

Homer's great epic poem, the *Iliad,* describes a war between the Greeks and the Trojans that lasted for ten years. The conflict began after Paris, a prince from Troy, eloped with Helen, the wife of the Greek king, Menelaus, and the Greeks mounted an expedition to get her back. On Mount Olympus, the gods and goddesses looked down on the battlefield, taking sides and influencing events as heroes of both sides fell. Finally, the Greeks were victorious and took Helen back home.



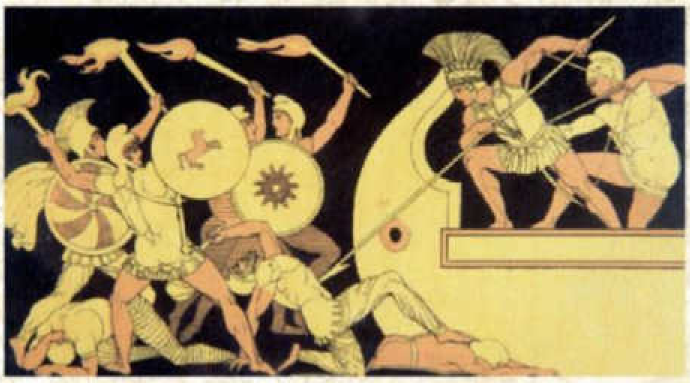
The Trojan horse The Trojans were known as skilled tamers of horses, so the booby-trapped wooden horse was an ironic gift from the Greeks, which had disastrous results.

THE MYTH

The two sides were well matched. Each had the services of good leaders, like the Trojan prince, Hector, and the Greek general, Agamemnon. Each had other famous soldiers and fighters on their side – Paris for the Trojans and men such as Achilles and the cunning Odysseus for the Greeks. Each side also had the backing of several gods and goddesses – Aphrodite and Poseidon were on the side of Troy; Apollo, Athena, and Hera favoured the Greeks. Therefore the stalemate continued, with many minor battles but no overall victory, for years.

ACHILLES AND PATROCLUS

The war reached a climax when two of the Greek leaders quarrelled. Agamemnon, who had been forced to give up one of his concubines, took as his mistress one of the many women of Achilles. In disgust, Achilles withdrew his forces from the fighting and the Trojans began to get the upper hand. To win back the initiative, Patroclus, a close friend of Achilles, asked his comrade for permission to lead his troops and disguise himself in the armour of Achilles. When the Trojan soldiers saw the best of the Greek troops back on the battlefield, apparently led by Achilles himself, they began to lose heart. This gave the Greeks more success, but just as they seemed to be winning, Hector killed Patroclus.



Soldiers in combat
In this engraving created in the style of Greek vase painting, Trojans attack the Greek ships with fire, while the Greeks defend themselves with their spears.

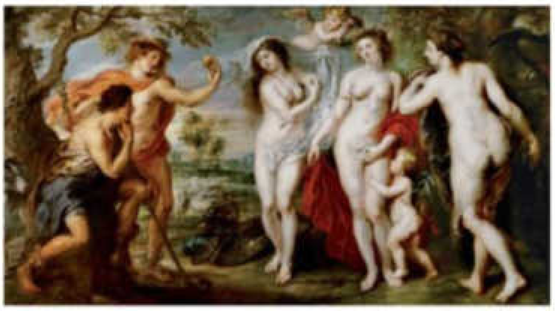
THE GREEKS GAIN GROUND

The death of Patroclus roused Achilles, who returned to the fight, killing Hector and dragging his body around Troy's walls. Next, the gods encouraged the Greeks to bring the great archer Philocretes into the battle, and the bowman killed Paris, a huge psychological blow for the Trojans. The Greeks then stole Athena's statue, which was a sign of good fortune for the Trojans, from her shrine in Troy.

Finally, the gods put into the mind of Odysseus the trick of the hollow wooden horse, in which soldiers could hide. The Greeks left the horse in front of the city and feigned a withdrawal. The Trojans dragged the statue into the city. During the night, Greek soldiers emerged from its belly and opened the city gates. The rest of the Greek army poured in and Troy was destroyed.

THE JUDGEMENT OF PARIS

The event that started the war occurred on Mount Ida, where the Trojan prince, Paris, was visited by three goddesses: Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. Eris, goddess of discord, had given them a golden apple, inscribed, “For the fairest”. Each of the three claimed the apple. Zeus commanded Hermes to take them to Paris, who would decide which was the most beautiful. The goddesses tried to influence his decision by offering bribes. Athena pledged to grant him success in war, Hera promised power, and Aphrodite offered the hand of the world’s most beautiful woman, Helen. Paris chose Aphrodite’s offer – but Helen was already married to Menelaus of Sparta. When she eloped with Paris, hostilities between Greece and Troy began.

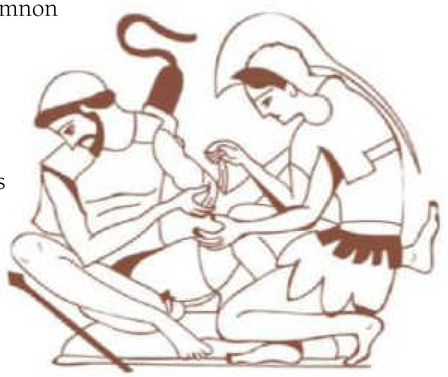


The three goddesses
After Paris judged Aphrodite to be the fairest among the three goddesses, he earned the wrath of both Athena and Hera.

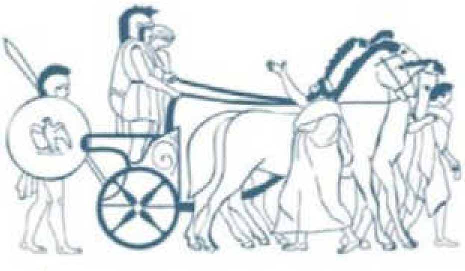
Helen of Troy
Several reasons have been given for Helen’s desertion of her husband, such as wickedness, forced abduction, and the influence of Aphrodite.

THE HEROES

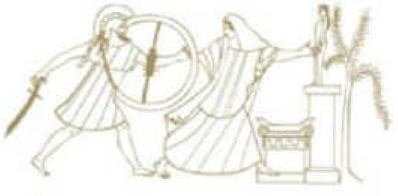
The story of the Trojan War is full of heroes who are the epic’s main characters. They are generally brave in battle, but Homer’s depiction of their characters is particularly interesting. Many are motivated by honour – the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon over their concubines, for example, ignites because when Agamemnon appropriates the woman of Achilles, the latter’s honour is affected. Homer shows that intelligence is essential in battle too: the hero Odysseus is renowned for his cunning.



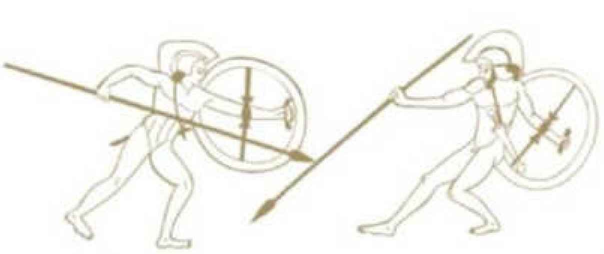
Achilles binding Patroclus’s wound
Friendship was an important motivation in the war – when Patroclus died, Achilles returned to the battle with renewed energy.



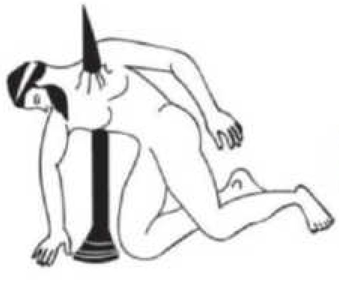
Agamemnon returning with Cassandra
At the end of the war, Troy was captured and sacked. Agamemnon carried off Cassandra, the daughter of King Priam of Troy, as a prize.



Menelaus pursuing Helen
Seen here pursuing his wife, Helen, Menelaus is portrayed in the *Iliad* as a noble king who fights bravely for his cause.



Hector fighting Achilles
Achilles and Hector’s fight was a key moment in the war. With Hector’s death, the Trojans were weakened by the loss of one of their greatest fighters.

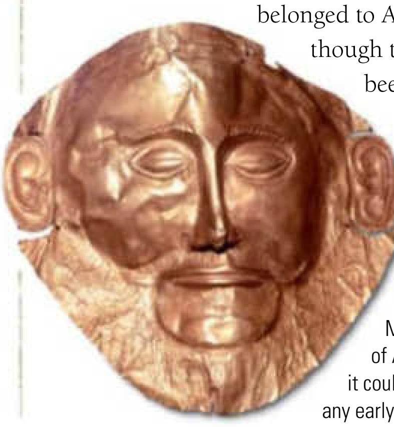


Ajax committing suicide
A great warrior, Ajax survived the war, but went mad after a dispute with Odysseus, and killed himself.

> ATHENE AND HERA THUNDERED, DOING HONOUR TO THE KING OF MYCENAE, RICH IN GOLD.
>
> Homer, *Iliad*, Book XI

THE ANCIENT CITY OF MYCENAE

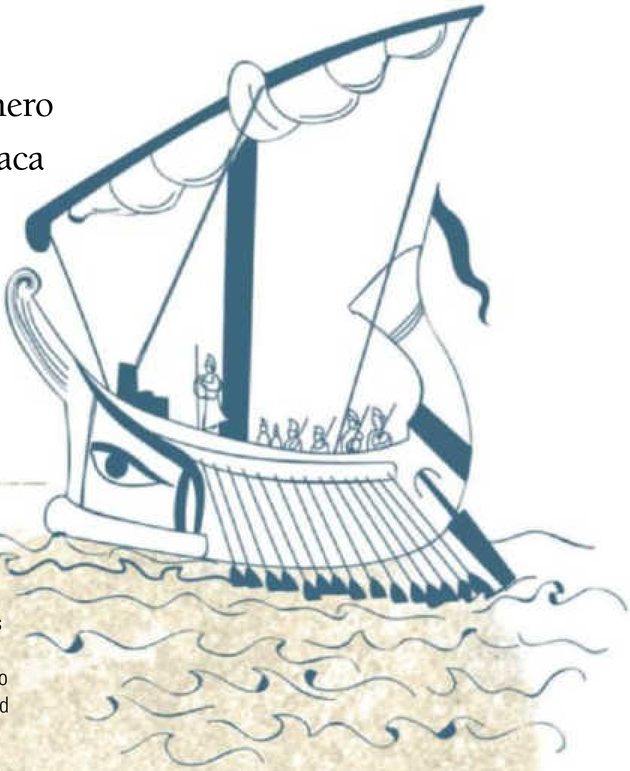
Although the story of the *Iliad* is a myth, all its characters come from real places in ancient Greece. Mycenae, in the northeastern Peloponnese, was said to be the home of Agamemnon. The city state was a strong military power during the Late Bronze Age. This ancient site was excavated in the 19th century by the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann. He discovered stunning jewellery and other artefacts among the ruins, dating back to the 2nd millennium BCE. He claimed these objects belonged to Agamemnon, though there has never been any evidence to support this.



Gold mask
Schliemann called this face of beaten gold unearthed from Mycenae “the mask of Agamemnon”, but it could have belonged to any early Mycenaean king.

THE ODYSSEY

Homer's second epic, the *Odyssey,* tells the story of the Greek hero Odysseus (Ulysses to the Romans) on his journey home to Ithaca after the Trojan War. He faces many perils, including monstrous creatures and seductive women. Each encounter stretches his intelligence and cunning. But his greatest challenge comes when he arrives home to find his wife besieged by suitors who believe him to be dead.



Greek ship
Greek ships had banks of oars but were also equipped with sails, so Odysseus's ships would have been able to take advantage of the wind.

THE MYTH

After leaving Troy, Odysseus and his sailors first came to the country of the Lotos Eaters. These inhabitants, who lived a lazy life of ease, tempted them with the lotos fruit, which had the power to make them forget the past. Odysseus had to force his reluctant companions back to their ships. Next they encountered the Cyclopes, a race of one-eyed giants. Odysseus and his followers were caught by one of the Cyclopes, Polyphemus, who kept them captive in a cave and ate some of them. When the Greek hero was asked to identify himself, he cleverly said he was called Outis (meaning "no one"). Odysseus plied Polyphemus with wine and then blinded the giant with a heated stake. When Polyphemus shouted, "Outis [no one] is killing me", the other Cyclopes heard him but did not come to his rescue because they thought he was drunk, and the Greeks managed to escape. Polyphemus complained to his father, the sea god Poseidon, who sent terrible storms to hinder Odysseus's journey.

AT THE MERCY OF THE WINDS

At their next port of call, Aeolus, the god of the winds, gave Odysseus the winds tied up in a bag, allowing him to control his course homewards. But Odysseus's men, filled with curiosity about the contents of the bag, untied it, letting loose all the winds. The ship was blown far off course, first to the land of the giant Laestrygonians, who destroyed most of their ships, and then to an island inhabited by the enchantress Circe, who turned Odysseus's men into pigs. But Odysseus saved himself by eating a protective herb given to him by the god Hermes. Circe saw that Odysseus was resistant to her magic, and turned his crew back into men again. Circe advised Odysseus to visit the Underworld to find out more about his future. He travelled there, and had a vision in which his homeland was occupied by hostile invaders. The hero decided to hurry home.

But his journey took longer than he had expected. Odysseus first encountered the Sirens, enchanting creatures whose beautiful song lured all passing sailors. He sailed past them by commanding his men to block their ears. After this, Odysseus's ship had to pass between Scylla, a six-headed, man-devouring monster, and Charybdis, a whirlpool. Odysseus was forced to take the painful decision of losing six of his sailors to Scylla, each of whose six heads could only eat one man at a time, rather than have all of them drown in the whirlpool of Charybdis.

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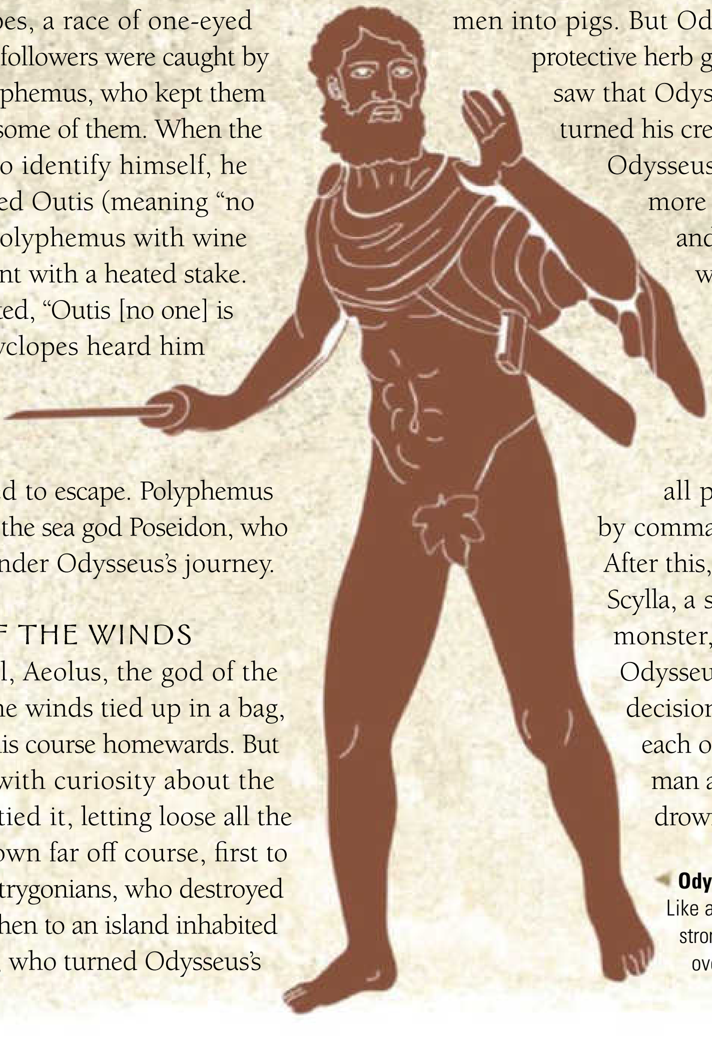
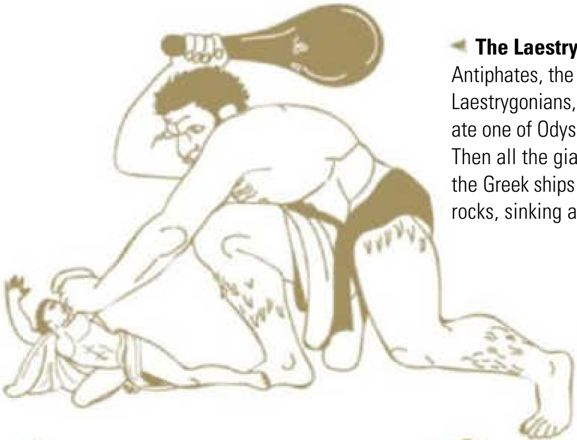


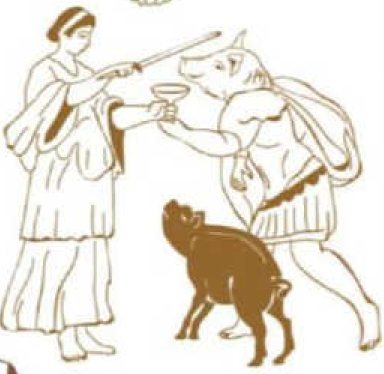
Odysseus
Like all Greek heroes, Odysseus was physically strong. But he was also cunning, which helped him overcome the obstacles that beset his voyage.

MONSTERS AND OBSTACLES

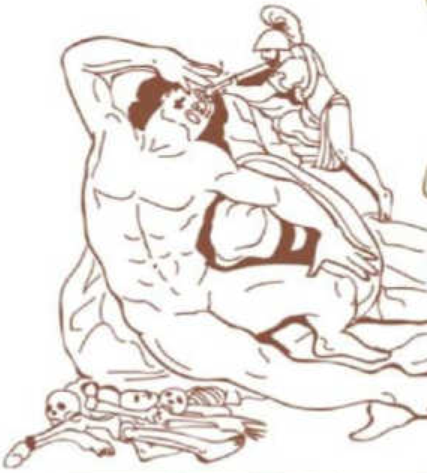
Odysseus encountered several obstacles on his journey. The giant Laestrygonians destroyed all the ships in his armada except for his own. When they were trapped in Polyphemus's cave, he and his men tied themselves to the underbellies of the Cyclops's sheep. The next day, Polyphemus let his sheep out to graze, and the Greeks escaped. On Circe's island, Odysseus's men were turned into pigs, thus delaying the voyage.



◄ **The Laestrygonians**
Antiphates, the king of the Laestrygonians, killed and ate one of Odysseus's men. Then all the giants pelted the Greek ships with huge rocks, sinking all but one.



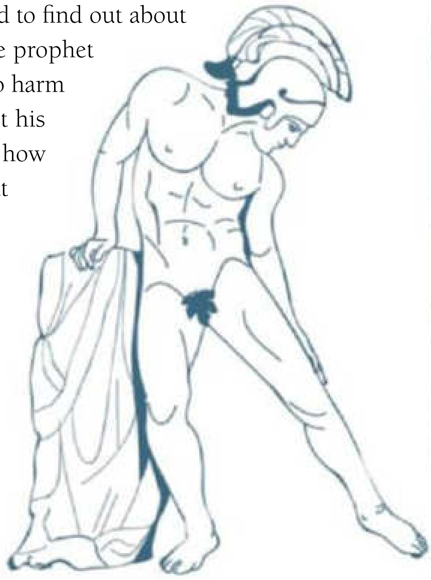
► **The magic of Circe**
The enchantress Circe turned men into animals by giving them a potion and striking them with her wand.



◄ **Odysseus and Polyphemus**
Using a sharpened stake of olive wood, Odysseus put out the single eye of Polyphemus so that he and his men could escape from the Cyclops's cave.

THE WORLD OF THE DEAD

Odysseus visited the Underworld to find out about his future. First he consulted the prophet Tiresias, who warned him not to harm the cattle of Helios. Then he met his mother, Anticleia, who told him how his wife and son were suffering at home. Odysseus also met the ghost of Achilles.
Finally, he grew fearful and left the Underworld in terror.

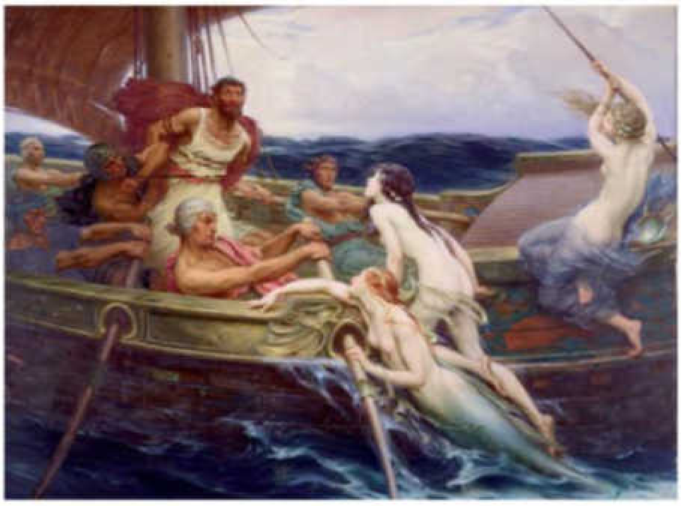


► **Achilles**
The ghost of Achilles told Odysseus he would rather live on Earth as a humble labourer than rule among the dead.

PERILS OF THE SEA

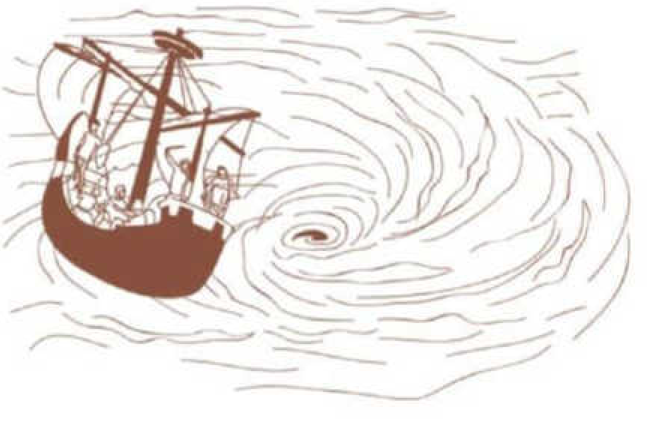
The Greeks were a people who lived mainly on islands and in coastal settlements, and hence were accomplished sailors. They knew well that sea voyages, even in the often calm Mediterranean, had their dangers, and that sailors had to watch out for unfavourable winds, dangerous whirlpools or currents, and jagged rocks. Odysseus had to cope with tempests sent by Poseidon, perilous currents, and some more fantastic dangers. Some of these, like the seductive song of the Sirens, could be deceptive – Odysseus was warned by Circe that the song of the Sirens must be resisted.

> NEVER YET HAS ANY MAN ROWED PAST THIS ISLE IN HIS BLACK SHIP UNTIL HE HAS HEARD THE SWEET VOICE FROM OUR LIPS.
>
> Homer, *Odyssey*, Book IX



▲ **Odysseus and the Sirens**
While his sailors blocked their ears, Odysseus had himself tied to the mast so that he could not follow the Sirens.

▼ **Charybdis**
This notorious whirlpool sank all passing ships, but Odysseus steered through the narrow gap between it and Scylla.



THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

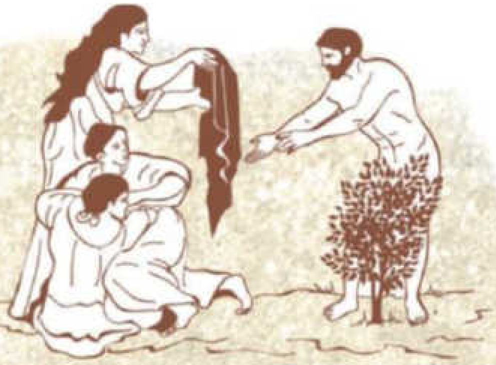
Odysseus next stopped at an island where Helios, the sun god, kept his cattle. Although they had been warned not to kill these animals, the sailors slaughtered a few of the cattle. Helios complained to Zeus, who struck their ship with a thunderbolt, killing the crew and shattering the ship. Only Odysseus survived, clinging to the wreckage.

Odysseus was washed up on the island belonging to the goddess Calypso, who wanted him to stay with her. Though he lived there for seven years, Odysseus finally resisted the temptation to stay further, and travelled on. He was then shipwrecked again and washed ashore on the island of Alcinous, the King of the Phaeacians. Here, the goddess Athena contrived to make the king's daughter, Nausicaa, meet Odysseus, and the two were attracted to each other. Odysseus was tempted to stay with her, but finally, longing for his wife and his homeland, Ithaca, he travelled on again.

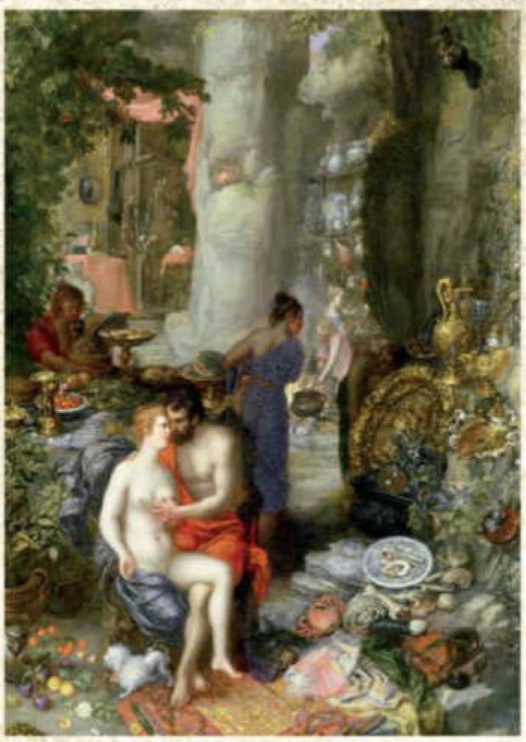
PENELOPE'S SUITORS

Bruised and greatly aged by his ordeal, Odysseus arrived in Ithaca to find his house full of suitors who, assuming he was dead, were hoping to marry his wife, Penelope, and take over all his lands and wealth. The suitors were living off Odysseus's food and abusing his wife's hospitality, just like the hostile invaders he had seen in his vision in the Underworld. Penelope did not want to marry any of them, so she said she would declare her choice when she had finished weaving a tapestry on which she was working.

Finally, Penelope had to make up her mind. She said she would marry the man who could string Odysseus's powerful bow. No one recognized Odysseus (he revealed himself only to his son, Telemachus) as he took his place with the others. He was the only one who succeeded in stringing the bow. Then Penelope realized the man was her husband. With the help of Telemachus, he killed all the suitors. But, though he loved Penelope, Odysseus, after wandering for so long, found it hard to settle down in Ithaca. Soon he was planning another journey and looking forward to more adventures.



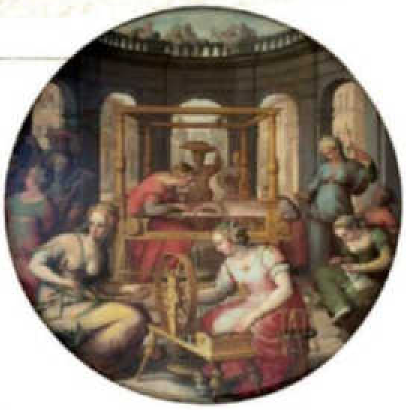
Nausicaa
The princess was with her friends at the seashore when a tired and naked Odysseus appeared before them. He was given clothes by Nausicaa.



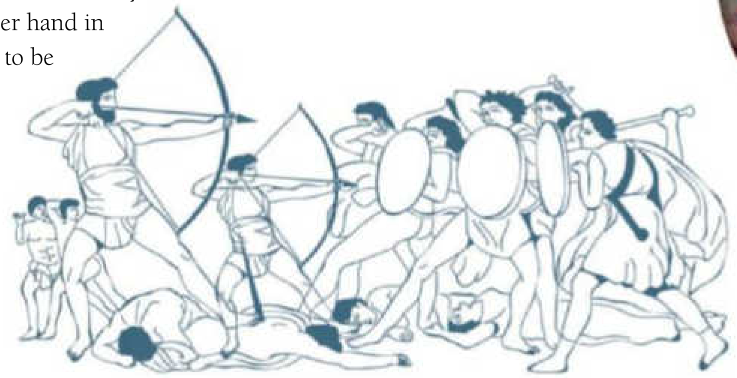
Odysseus and Calypso
Promised agelessness and immortality by Calypso, Odysseus was tempted to remain with her forever, but in the end he constructed a raft and resumed his journey home to Ithaca.

ITHACA

When Odysseus landed in Ithaca, he disguised himself as a beggar to find out what was going on in his house. He discovered that his wife and his son were alive, but they were beset by trouble. Many suitors were pressing Penelope for her hand in marriage. Because they believed Odysseus to be dead, their requests were legitimate, but still their behaviour was inexcusable. For the Greeks, hospitality was the greatest of virtues, but the suitors abused Penelope's hospitality and showed no respect for her own sentiments. This abuse justified their eventual killing by Odysseus and his son, Telemachus.



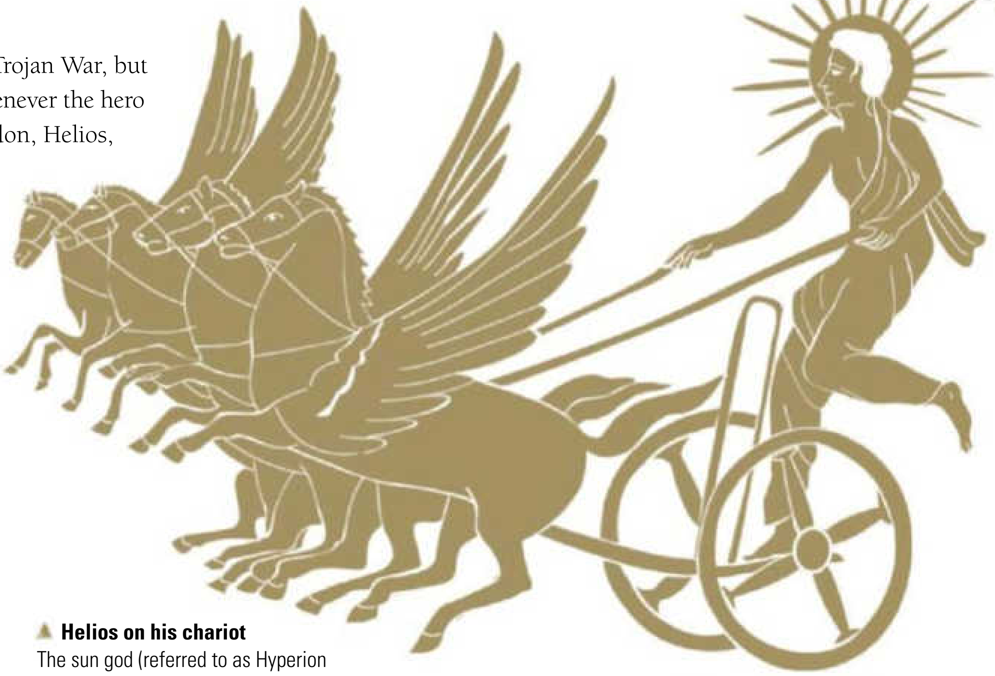
Penelope weaving
Odysseus's loyal wife unravelled a bit of her tapestry every night, to put off the day when she would have to choose between the many suitors clamouring for her hand.



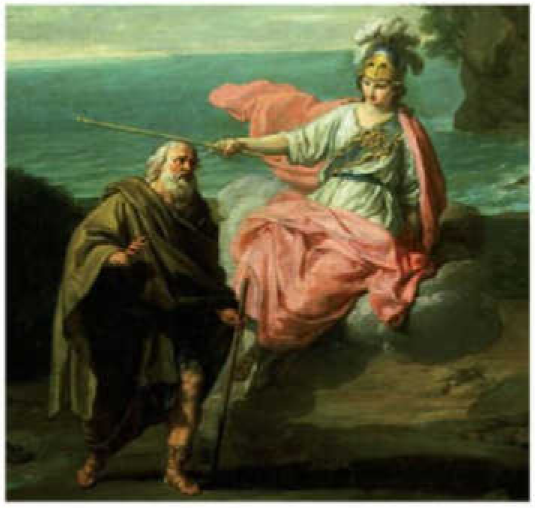
Death of the suitors
Odysseus and Telemachus both launched an attack on the suitors, who quaked behind their shields as they fell one by one.

DIVINE INTERVENTION

The gods of Mount Olympus not only influenced the Trojan War, but also had an impact on the adventures of Odysseus. Whenever the hero offended a deity, his journey home was delayed. Poseidon, Helios, and Zeus himself, all hampered the progress of the voyage. After blinding Polyphemus, Odysseus shouted out his real name to the Cyclops as he sailed away. Polyphemus told Poseidon that Odysseus had blinded him, and the sea god unleashed a series of storms to wreck his ships. When Odysseus's men slew the cattle of Helios, Zeus punished them. Though Hermes saved Odysseus from the magic of Circe, the one deity who consistently protected and advised the cunning hero was Athena.

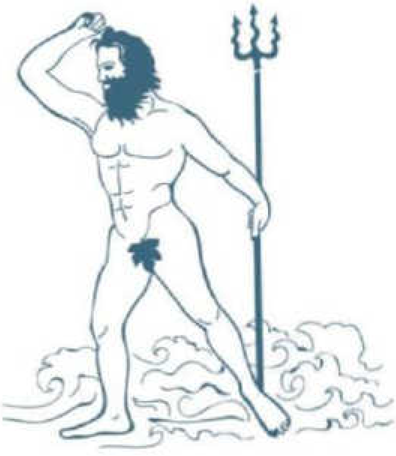


▲ **Helios on his chariot**
The sun god (referred to as Hyperion by Homer) exerted his power when the Greeks ate the meat of his cattle, making the beef bellow as if it were alive.



▲ **Divine protector**
Athena was Odysseus's benefactor. She persuaded Calypso to release him, set up his meeting with Nausicaa, and advised him to disguise himself before confronting his wife's suitors.

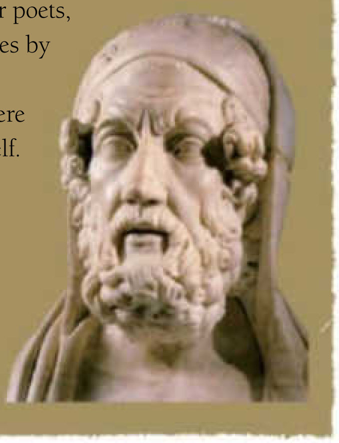
> SOME WORK OF NOBLE NOTE, MAY YET BE DONE,
> NOT UNBECOMING MEN THAT STROVE WITH GODS.
>
> Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Ulysses*, 1842



Poseidon

HOMER

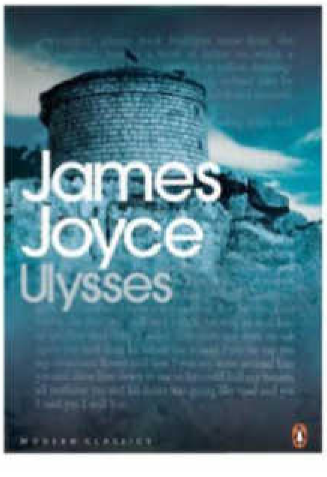
Both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are attributed to Homer, a blind poet who probably lived in the 8th century BCE. Little is known about Homer, and some scholars believe the epics were actually the work of earlier poets, who handed down the narratives by word of mouth, adapting and modifying them before they were written down by Homer himself. The two epics combine story, character, and poetic language so effectively that Homer is considered even today as one of the world's greatest writers.



Homer

MODERN ODYSSEYS

The adventures of Odysseus are immensely popular. Because Homer's epic is a powerful tale with an open-ended conclusion, its material has been used in new ways. One of these "modern Odysseys" is *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* (1938), a long poem by Nikos Kazantzakis (1883–1957), describing Odysseus's new adventures. *Ulysses* (1922), a novel by James Joyce (1882–1941), also uses the idea of an odyssey in its story about Leopold Bloom, a native of Dublin, who makes a meandering journey around his home city.



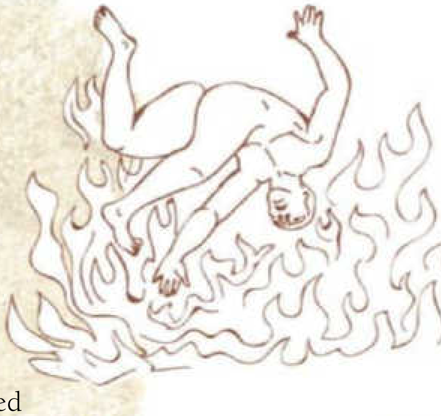
► **Joyce's *Ulysses***
Bloom's wanderings take place in the course of a single day. The characters and encounters allude to episodes from the Greek myth.

CLASSICAL ANTIHEROES

The myths of ancient Greece are full of people – usually mortals but often powerful figures such as kings or princes – who broke the rules of normal conduct. They did this by cheating their fellow mortals, by abusing gifts or hospitality, or by insulting the gods. These antiheroes often ended up with dire punishments, as a warning to others tempted to break the social or cult rules that normally made social or religious life run smoothly.

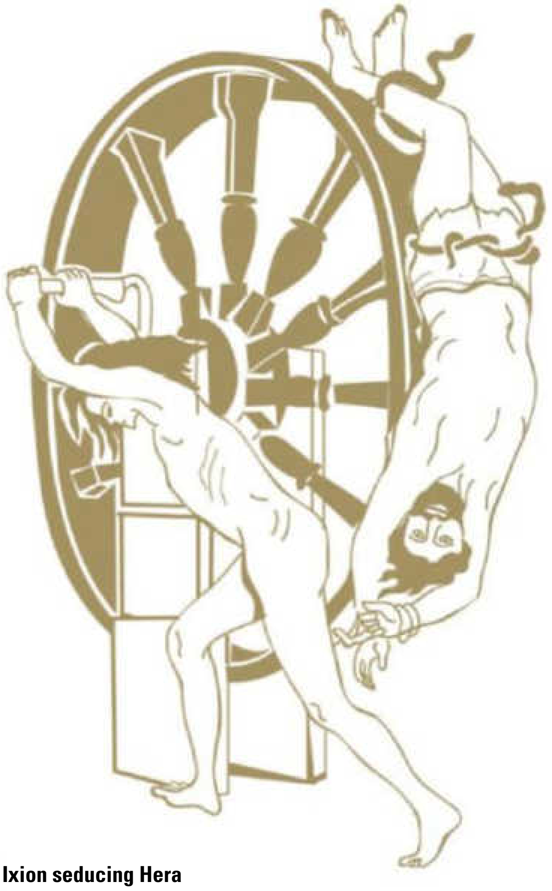
IXION

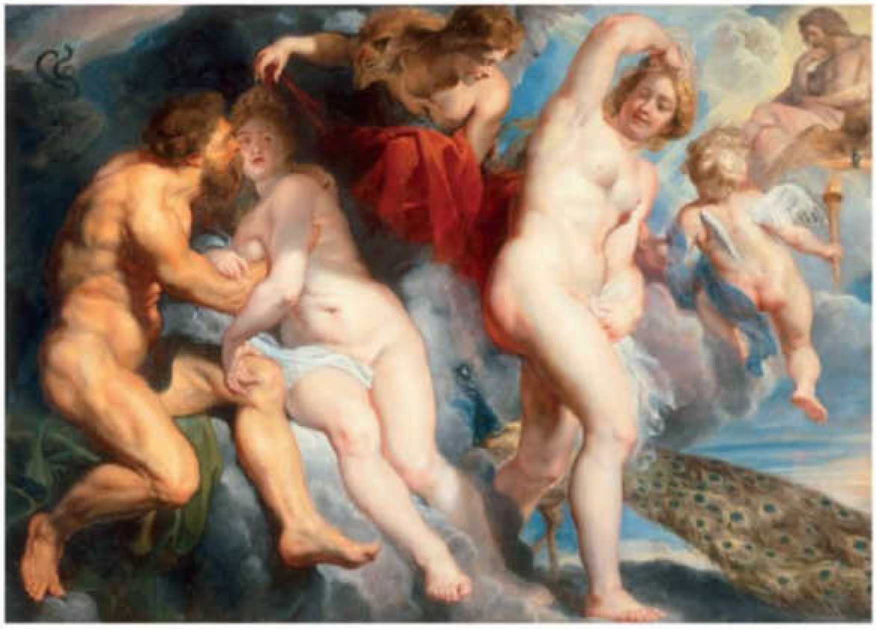
The King of the Lapiths of Thessaly, Ixion was a cheat and a deceiver. He abducted Dia, the daughter of Eioneus, in order to marry her, and agreed to pay the dowry to the girl's father when he came to the wedding. However, he did not want to part with a large sum of money, so on the day of the wedding, the king set a cruel trap for Eioneus. He dug a pit near his palace and filled it with burning coal, and when his unsuspecting father-in-law arrived, Ixion pushed him to his death. Following this outrage, Ixion was ostracized by all mortals for killing a kinsman, but for some reason Zeus took pity on him and invited him to a banquet on Mount Olympus. Even among the gods, he overstepped the bounds of propriety and tried to seduce Hera, Zeus's wife. Zeus punished Ixion for attempting to outrage his wife's modesty by binding him to a burning wheel, which would turn forever in the Underworld.



◄ **The killing of Eioneus**
By pushing Eioneus to his death, Ixion was violating the ideal of hospitality, one of the most important values of the Greeks.

▼ **Ixion's punishment**
Some myths describe Ixion's wheel as the disc of the sun; according to others it was a wheel that turned in the Underworld.

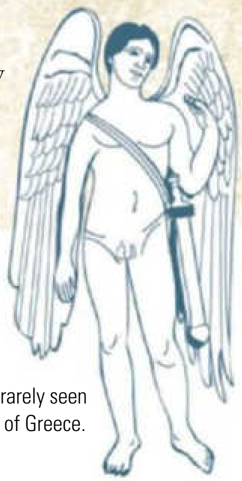




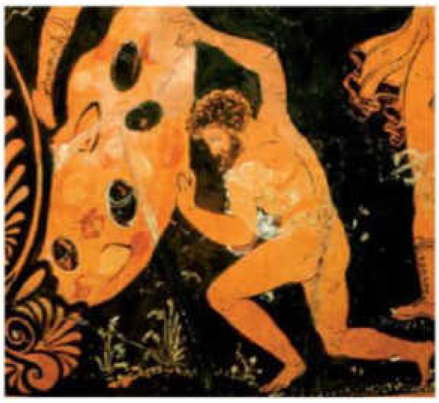
◄ **Ixion seducing Hera**
When Zeus discovered Ixion's intentions, he tricked him into sleeping with a cloud shaped like Hera. The offspring of this union was Centaurus, the ancestor of the Centaurs.

SISYPHUS

The founder of the city of Corinth, Sisyphus was guilty of several transgressions, including killing guests and seducing his own niece. Banished to the Underworld for his deeds, he tried to cheat death, first by confining Thanatos, the god of mortality, but without success. Then he instructed his wife not to carry out the burial rites for him. When Hades sent him back to Earth to ensure that the rites were performed, Sisyphus refused to return to the Underworld. For his presumption in trying to turn himself into an immortal, Sisyphus was condemned to roll a heavy boulder up a hill. When the rock reached the hilltop, it rolled back down again, so Sisyphus had to keep repeating his task eternally.



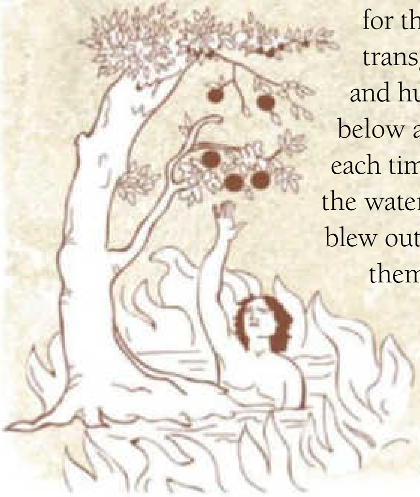
► **Thanatos**
The son of Night and Darkness, Thanatos was a much feared but rarely seen god in the myths of Greece.



◄ **Sisyphus pushing a rock**
For artists and writers in both ancient and modern times, Sisyphus and his terrible punishment became the iconic image of hard, endless, and pointless tasks.

TANTALUS

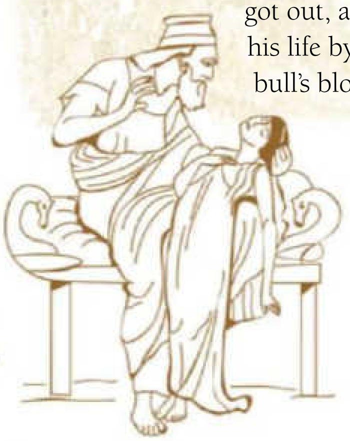
The King of Sipylus in Lydia, Tantalus was a son of Zeus. As a relative of Zeus he was allowed to dine with the gods, but he abused this privilege. Some myths say he gossiped about the gods' secrets, others that he stole food from them and gave it to mortals. According to an extreme version, he tested the gods by serving the flesh of his own son for them to eat. His punishment for these transgressions was to suffer eternal thirst and hunger. He was made to stand in a pool below a fruit-laden tree. The pool emptied each time Tantalus tried desperately to drink the water, while the overhanging branches blew out of reach whenever he tried to grasp them, hence the word, "tantalize".



◄ **Tantalus's punishment**
The fruit represented an inversion of the usual bounty of the gods, a fitting punishment for Tantalus's insults to the Olympians.

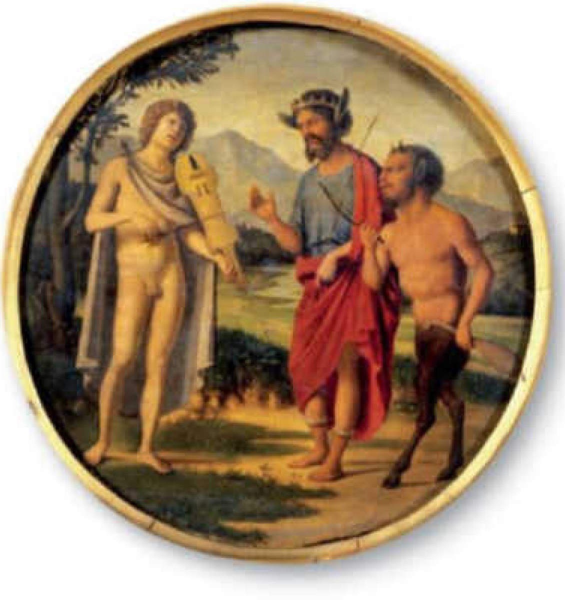
MIDAS

King Midas of Phrygia helped Silenus, a follower of Dionysus, and in return the god granted Midas any favour he wished. The king, who was consumed by greed, asked that everything he touched should change to gold. But when his food and drink were turned to gold, Midas asked Dionysus to take the gift away. One day, he came across Pan and Apollo in the countryside. The two gods were having an argument about who was the better musician. Midas chose Pan over the god of music, and an irate Apollo punished him by giving him the ears of an ass. Midas had to keep his head covered with a turban, but news of his ridiculous ears got out, and he ended his life by drinking hot bull's blood.



◄ **Midas wih his daughter**
In some versions of Midas's myth, the king touches his daughter and she turns into a golden statue.

▼ **Midas with Pan and Apollo**
In spite of the fact that other listeners thought Apollo to be the better musician, Midas chose his rival Pan, rousing the anger of the other deity.

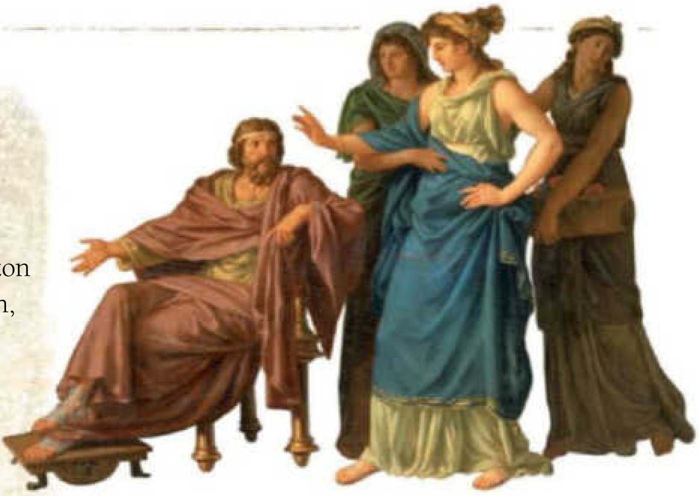


CLASSICAL ANTIHEROINES

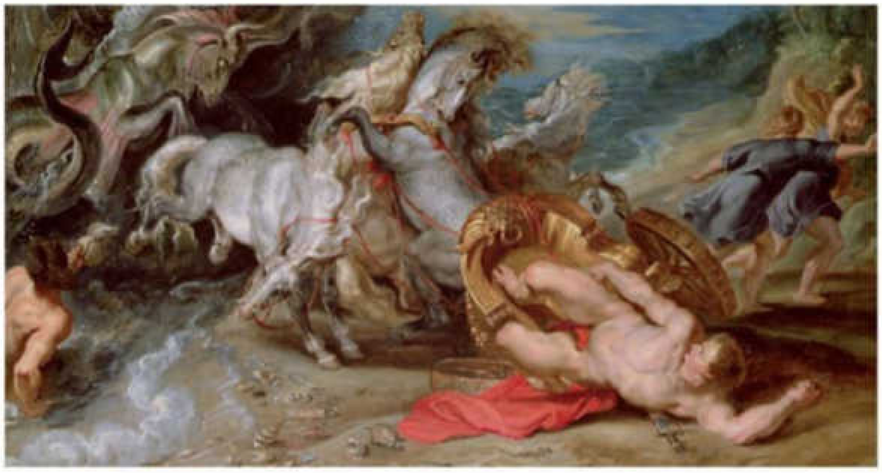
Greek mythology has many antiheroines who were embroiled in complex plots, mostly involving revenge. A number of them, such as Ino and Clytemnestra, chose to do so out of jealousy, or because they lacked the moral and social virtues considered necessary in noble women. But the actions of others were guided more by the interference of gods in human affairs. These antiheroines were often responsible, directly or indirectly, for the deaths of others, and their stories frequently ended with their own deaths, often by suicide.

PHAEDRA

The daughter of King Minos of Crete and his wife, Pasiphae, Phaedra married Theseus after he had become the ruler of Athens. But she fell in love with Hippolytus, Theseus's son by Antiope, an Amazon queen who had been Theseus's mistress. In some versions of the myth, her passion was caused by the gods as a way of punishing Theseus for killing Antiope. When Hippolytus rebuffed Phaedra's amorous advances, she told Theseus that Hippolytus had tried to rape her. The enraged king turned against his son and called on the gods to punish the young man. Hearing Theseus's cry, Poseidon blew up a storm that knocked Hippolytus off his chariot to his death. Grief-stricken, Phaedra hanged herself on hearing about her stepson's death.

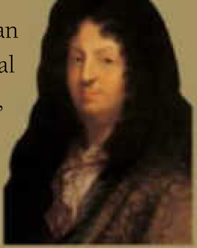


▲ **Phaedra and Theseus**
The death of Hippolytus was the result of the doomed marriage between Phaedra and the Athenian king. Her brother, Deucalion, gave her in marriage to Theseus, despite knowing about his liaison with Antiope.



▲ **The death of Hippolytus**
When Poseidon raised a storm, a monster in the form of a bull rose from the sea, terrifying Hippolytus's horses. Theseus's son was thrown off his chariot and dragged to his death.

JEAN RACINE

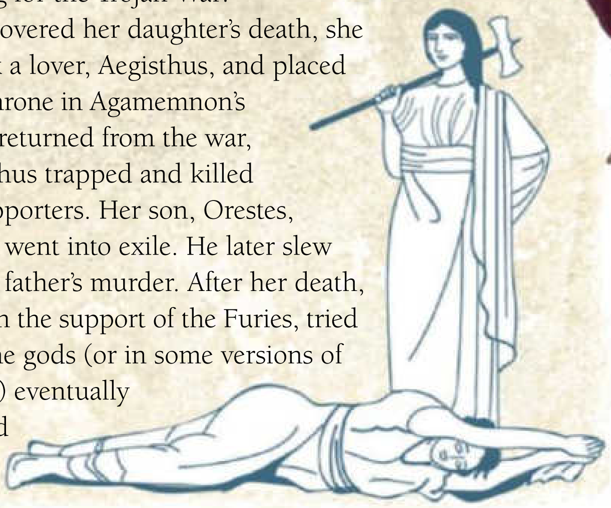


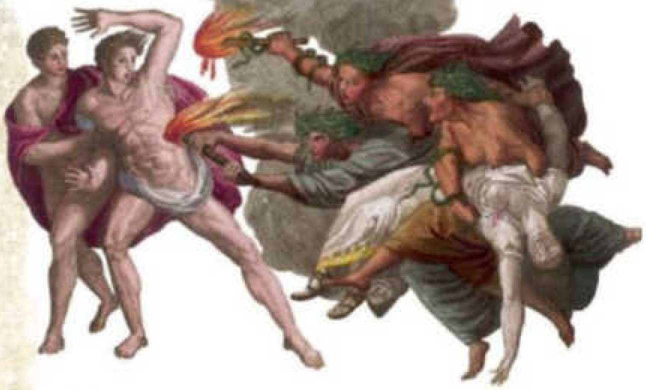
Jean Racine

The great French dramatist Jean Racine (1639–99) wrote several tragedies on Classical themes, including *Phèdre*. He believed that tragedy was inherent in the human condition and that unfortunate events were not necessary to bring people into tragic situations. In Racine's plays, action is kept to a minimum and the characters analyse their passions in language of great poetic beauty. In *Phèdre*, he affirms the nobility of his heroine by altering the story, so that she falls in love with her stepson only when she believes Theseus to be dead.

CLYTEMNESTRA

The wife of Agamemnon, the King of Mycenae, Clytemnestra had four children by her husband: Iphigenia, Electra, Chrysothemis, and Orestes. Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia to the gods in order to ensure a fair wind for the Greek fleet sailing for the Trojan War.
When Clytemnestra discovered her daughter's death, she vowed revenge. She took a lover, Aegisthus, and placed him on the Mycenaean throne in Agamemnon's absence. When the king returned from the war, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus trapped and killed him and many of his supporters. Her son, Orestes, escaped the carnage and went into exile. He later slew his mother to avenge his father's murder. After her death, Clytemnestra's ghost, with the support of the Furies, tried to punish Orestes, but the gods (or in some versions of the story, a human court) eventually decided that what he had done was justified.



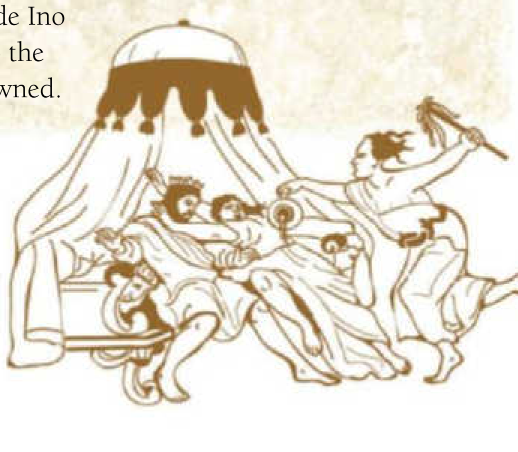


▲ **The punishment of Orestes**
The Furies, seen here holding Clytemnestra's corpse, attacked Orestes with thunderbolts. Later, Orestes's faithful sister, Electra, nursed him and helped him recover from his wounds.

◄ **The murder of Agamemnon**
Clytemnestra and Aegisthus trapped Agamemnon in a net and brutally killed him with an axe. Some accounts of his death say that Agamemnon was defenceless, in his bath, cleaning away the dirt of his long journey home, when the murder took place.

INO

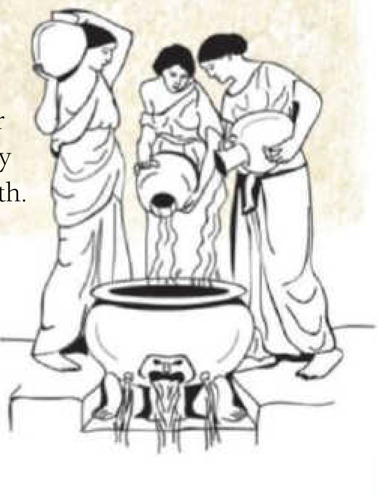
King Athamas of Boeotia was married to Nephele, but left her for Ino, the daughter of Cadmus. Ino resented her stepchildren, Phrixus and Helle, and devised a plot to dispose of them. She lit a fire beneath the granary and dried up all the seeds so that they would not germinate, thereby causing a famine. When Athamas sent a messenger to the oracle at Delphi to ask for a solution, Ino bribed the messenger to say that Athamas should sacrifice Phrixus. The king was about to kill his son when Hera sent a golden ram to carry off his children. Although Phrixus survived, Helle fell from the ram's back and drowned in the sea, which was named the Hellespont (now called the Dardanelles) after her. Nephele wanted Athamas punished, so according to some versions of the story, Hera sent one of the Furies to drive him and Ino mad. Later, Athamas made Ino jump off a cliff into the sea, where she drowned.



► **Divine justice**
Hera was enraged at Athamas and Ino, and Nephele persisted in demanding they should be punished, so the goddess sent one of the Furies, Tisiphone, to torment the guilty couple.

THE DAUGHTERS OF DANAUS

Danaus, a grandson of Poseidon, had 50 daughters, while his brother, Aegyptus, had 50 sons. The two brothers quarrelled over their father's lands after his death, until Aegyptus offered to marry his sons to Danaus's daughters to unite the family. But an oracle had once told Danaus that Aegyptus planned to kill him and his daughters, so he ran away with his family. Aegyptus gave chase, besieging them in the city of Argos until they ran out of food and were forced to agree to the marriages. Danaus gave each of his daughters a hairpin and asked them to kill their husbands with it. All the daughters except one carried out their father's instructions, for which they were severely punished after their death.



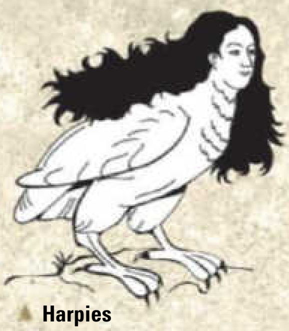
► **Eternal punishment**
When the guilty daughters died, they went to the Underworld, where they were forced to pour water into a large vessel that perpetually leaked, so their task was never-ending.

THE ARGONAUTS

The myth of Jason and the Argonauts is one of the greatest quest stories in all mythology. It concerns Jason, heir to the throne of Iolcus in northeastern Greece. When Jason was a child, his uncle, Pelias, usurped the kingdom and imprisoned Jason's father, King Aeson. Jason's mother, Alcimede, smuggled him away and entrusted his care to Cheiron the Centaur, who raised him. After Jason grew to manhood, he went to Pelias and demanded the kingdom that was rightfully his own. Pelias said that Jason could only be king if he stole and brought back the precious Golden Fleece from King Aeëtes of Colchis.

THE MYTH

For his journey to Colchis, Jason had a special ship built, named the *Argo*. The ship's timbers included planks taken from a sacred oak tree at the oracle of Zeus at Dodona, making the vessel especially strong. Jason persuaded many of Greece's greatest heroes, including Heracles, Polydeuces, Peleus, and Orpheus, to join him on the *Argo*. This group of heroes became known as the Argonauts.



▲ **Harpies**
With their hardened beaks and talons and their poisonous droppings, the Harpies were formidable monsters.

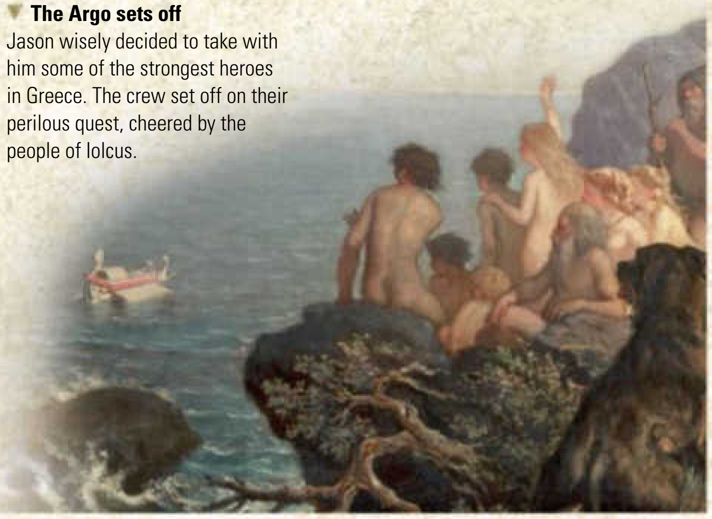
DANGERS AND OBSTACLES

The heroes faced all kinds of obstacles on their journey, from encounters with attractive women who delayed their quest, to confrontations with the deadly perils of the sea. First, they were seduced by the all-female population of the island of Lemnos, delaying their progress for several months. Then one of their number, Hylas, left the quest when water nymphs pulled him into a well, and his friend, Heracles, distressed at his loss, left the *Argo* to save him. The remaining Argonauts had still more dangerous challenges ahead. They got involved in a boxing match with King Amycus, a formidable fighter who usually killed his opponents. They were saved by the prowess of Polydeuces, who is said to have invented the sport of boxing. In another encounter they met a blind prophet called Phineus who was tortured by the Harpies, bird-like creatures with women's heads, also known as the hounds of Zeus. These frightful beings continually snatched away Phineus's food and pecked at his eyes. Two of the Argonauts chased the Harpies away and in return a grateful Phineus helped them sail through the Clashing Rocks, one of several other perils that they had to negotiate before reaching Colchis.

CHALLENGES IN COLCHIS

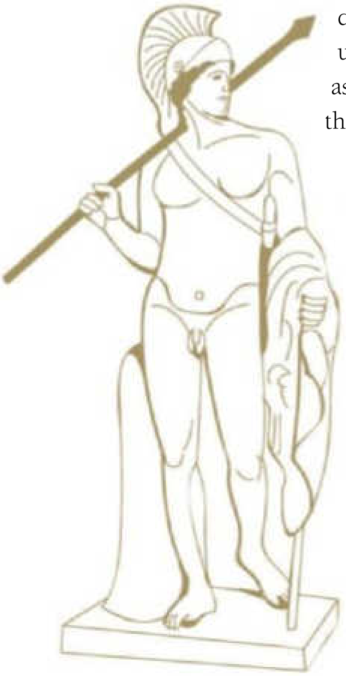
In Colchis, King Aeëtes did not want to lose the Golden Fleece, so he set Jason a challenge – to tame a pair of fire-breathing bulls and use them to pull a plough, dropping the teeth of serpents into the soil as he went. From the teeth, armed warriors would spring up to attack Jason. The hero only succeeded because the daughter of Aeëtes, the sorceress Medea, had fallen in love with him and helped him accomplish the task. Her father, however, still would not let Jason take the fleece. Then she suggested that Orpheus's music would charm the poisonous serpent guarding it and put it to sleep. With the fleece finally in his hands, Jason sailed for home, negotiating hazards such as Scylla and Charybdis, the Sirens, and the giant Talos, who threw huge rocks at the ship until Medea killed him with a deadly glance. At last Jason reached Iolcus and claimed his kingship.

▼ **The Argo sets off**
Jason wisely decided to take with him some of the strongest heroes in Greece. The crew set off on their perilous quest, cheered by the people of Iolcus.

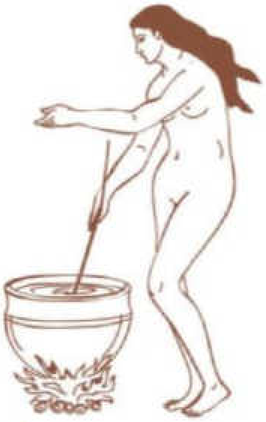


KEY CHARACTERS

Ancient writings contain several different lists of the Argonauts, but they all agree in including many of the most prominent ancient Greek heroes, such as Heracles, Patroclus, and Peleus, as well as the twins Castor and Polydeuces. Some accounts list the huntress Atalanta as the only woman warrior among the crew. Most of these characters embodied great strength and skill in arms, but such qualities would have been useless without others such as the sorcery of Medea or the music of Orpheus.



◄ **Jason**
After his successful quest, some accounts state that Jason ruled happily in Iolcus. Others allege that his life was ruined by Medea's scheming.



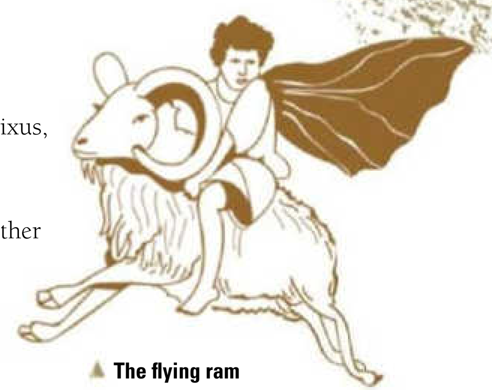
▲ **Medea**
As she was a priestess of Hecate, the Underworld goddess, Medea could use her sorcery to help Jason.

◄ **Orpheus**
Orpheus's entrancing music helped the Argonauts on many occasions throughout their arduous journey.

> THE HEROES SHONE LIKE GLEAMING STARS AMONG THE CLOUDS.
>
> Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica I*

THE GOLDEN FLEECE

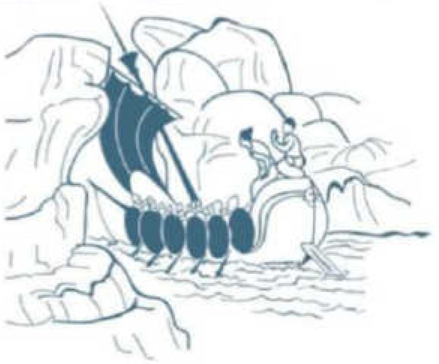
Athamas, king of Thebes, had a legitimate son, Phrixus, as well as children by Ino, his mistress. Ino tried to cause the death of Phrixus, so that one of her own children could inherit the throne. Nephele, the mother of Phrixus, arranged for him to fly out of danger to Colchis on the back of a golden ram. Aeëtes, ruler of Colchis, welcomed him, hoping that Phrixus would give him the ram, but he sacrificed the beast to Ares and the priests of Ares displayed the fleece in a garden. It was guarded by a serpent that never slept. Pelias, who sent Jason on his quest, was the cousin of Phrixus.



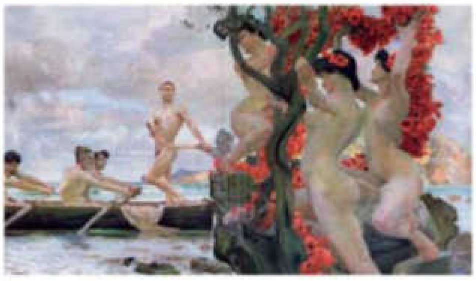
▲ **The flying ram**
The ram was such a tireless flyer that it carried Phrixus all the way from Thebes to Colchis, which was said to be at the very edge of the world.

DANGERS AT SEA

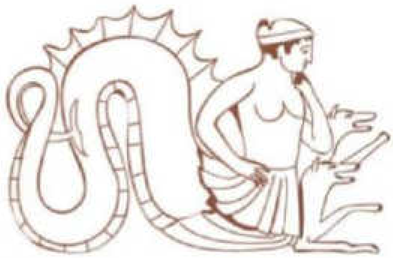
Jason and the Argonauts had to pass several of the perilous obstacles that had also been faced by Odysseus on his journey home from Troy – both heroes faced the Sirens, with their alluring music, and Scylla and Charybdis. In addition, Jason had to pass between the Clashing Rocks. The challenges of weather, navigation, and the perils of the sea took the Argonauts on a much longer route than Odysseus's, however. Their journey encompassed the Black Sea, the Danube, the Adriatic, and the Mediterranean.



▲ **The Clashing Rocks**
This pair of living rocks, said to be at the entrance to the Black Sea, slammed together when a ship tried to pass between them.



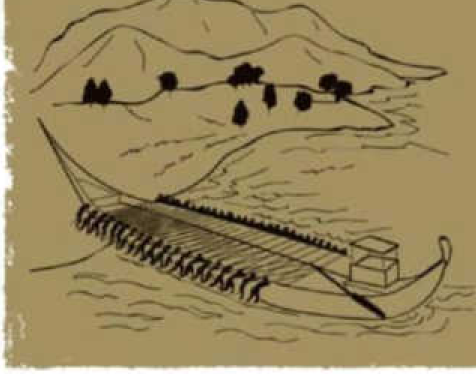
▲ **The Sirens**
The Sirens lured sailors with their seductive song. When the Argonauts sailed by them, Orpheus played his lyre continuously to drown out their voices.



▲ **Scylla**
The sea nymph Thetis helped the *Argo* to sail past Scylla, the monster who devoured sailors passing through the Strait of Messina.

THE ARGO

Made by the shipbuilder Argus, the *Argo* had a prow with the gift of prophecy given by Athena. The vessel was thus able to take Jason and his companions through a series of deadly perils. The craft had more than one bank of oars so it could be rowed at speed.



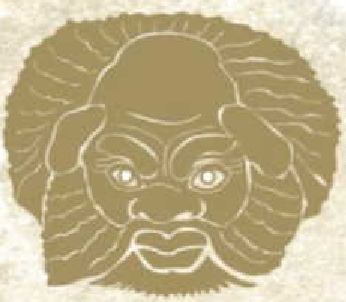
The ship with the magical prow

GUARDIAN DEITIES

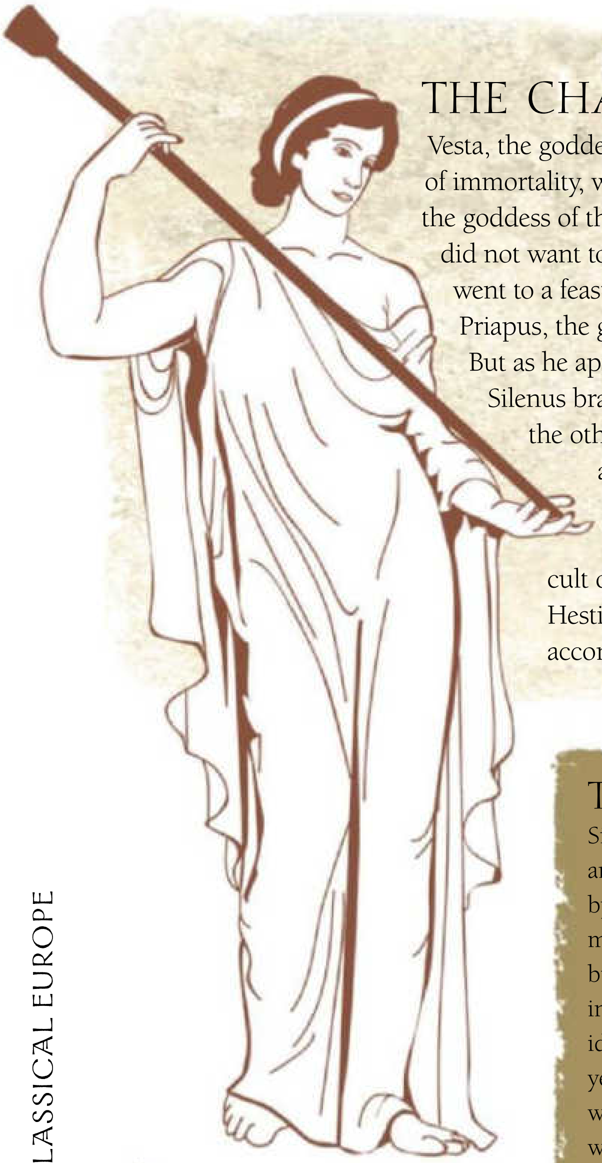
In addition to the great gods who were related to the Greek Olympians, there were a number of deities who were much closer to the Roman people. Many of these were worshipped at small shrines in people's houses. They were guardian spirits who looked after the members of the household in return for offerings made at the home altars. Some of these deities, such as the goddess Vesta, also had state shrines that the Romans maintained in the hope that they would look after the city and the empire.

THE CHASTE GODDESS

Vesta, the goddess of the domestic hearth and preserver of the flame of immortality, was the daughter of the primal god Saturn and Ops, the goddess of the harvest. Unlike her sisters, Juno and Ceres, Vesta did not want to marry and remained a virgin. Once, when she went to a feast held by the goddess Cybele, she fell asleep. Priapus, the god of fertility, saw her and was filled with desire. But as he approached her, a donkey belonging to the satyr Silenus brayed loudly in her ear. Vesta awoke at once and all the other guests came running to see what had made such a noise. Priapus was foiled and Vesta's honour was preserved. Hence, during the feast held in honour of Vesta, donkeys were crowned with flowers. According to some accounts, the objects sacred to the cult of Vesta were the hearth fire and pure water in a clay vase. Although the goddess Hestia is often considered to be the Greek counterpart of Vesta, the Romans accorded far more importance to the hearth goddess in their religion than the Greeks.



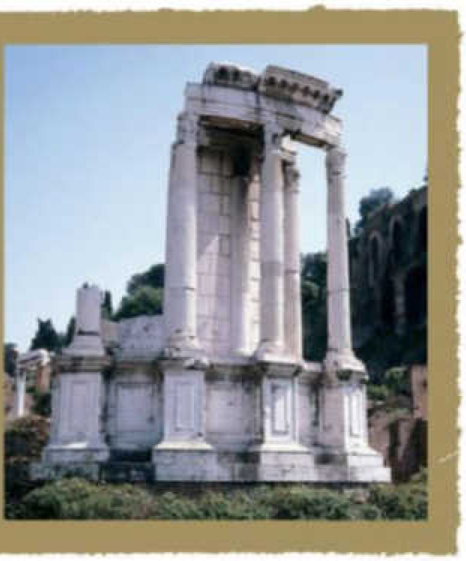
▲ **Silenus**
Snub-nosed and thick-lipped, Silenus often got so drunk that he could not even ride his donkey without falling off.



▲ **Vesta, the goddess of the hearth**
Vesta was usually portrayed as a young woman carrying a sceptre. A festival called the Vestalia was celebrated in her honour, during which her temple was opened for offering sacrifices.

THE TEMPLE OF VESTA

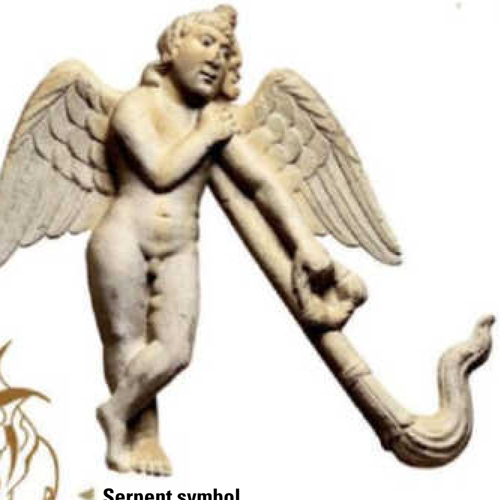
Since Vesta was the guardian of both the home and the state, the Roman people worshipped her by making sacrifices to her at home as well as by maintaining her temple. This was a circular building – its round shape may have been an imitation of prehistoric houses, conveying the idea that the temple had been there for many years. Inside, Vesta was represented by a fire, which symbolized both immortality and the well-being of Rome itself. It was never allowed to go out and was always tended by a group of priestesses called the vestal virgins.



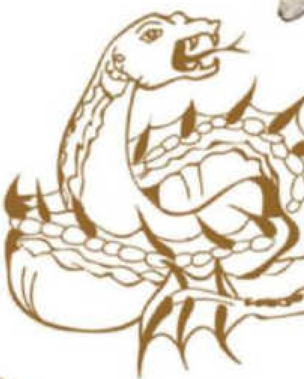
Vesta's temple in Rome

THE GENIUS

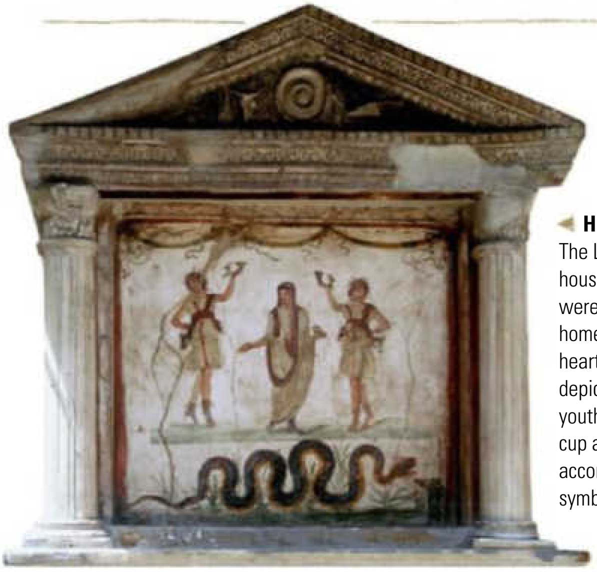
The Romans believed that every man was helped all through his life by a Genius, a kind of guardian angel who looked after his interests and took the form of a winged figure or a man holding a cornucopia (horn of plenty). Men made offerings to their Genius on their birthdays, and when they enjoyed good fortune, they offered wine, incense, or flowers. A man's Genius presided over his house and his marriage, ensuring his health and his ability to father children. Men, ancestors, households, specific places, and even the city of Rome itself were all said to possess their own Genius, but women were under the protection of Junones, who served the goddess Juno.



Winged Genius with torch
Alighting on the house or on the marriage-bed of young men, the winged Genius was a guardian spirit. It was said to be the protector of Roman menfolk.



Serpent symbol
Many Roman dwellings were home to harmless snakes who quietly came and went. Consequently, serpents in general became symbols of the Genius.



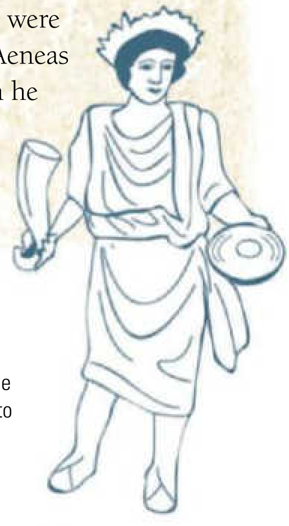
Household shrine
The Lares were household gods who were worshipped at home shrines and at the hearth. They were often depicted as dancing youths with a horn cup and a bowl, and accompanied by symbolic serpents.

THE LARES

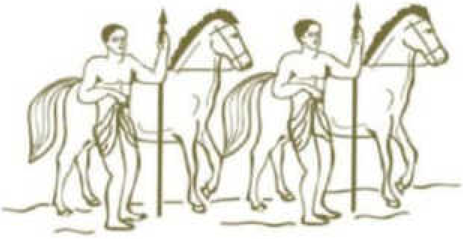
The Romans worshipped several kinds of spirits called Lares on special days and major family occasions. Some of these were malevolent spirits who haunted crossroads and had to be pacified with offerings, while others were kinder rural spirits who brought good crops. Perhaps the most widely worshipped Lares were the benevolent twin gods who protected Roman households. They were the sons of Mania, the goddess of madness, and Mercury, the messenger of the gods, but they also had a close link with Diana, the goddess of the hunt. The Lares were said to borrow Diana's hounds and use them to chase away any thieves or criminals who might threaten any of the households where they were worshipped. Besides having statues of the Lares in the home, Romans also hung an image of Mania at their front doors to ward off evildoers.

THE PENATES

Like the Lares, the Penates (also known as "the inner ones") were a pair of gods who protected Roman households. They were usually depicted as youths, and their statues were present in every Roman home.The name "Penates" has the same root as the word "penetralia", which means pantry, and hence they became gods of the table and the larder. When a Roman family sat down to a meal, the head of the household offered some of the food to the Penates before the family members themselves were served. It was said that the Penates were originally Trojan deities, and that Aeneas brought them to central Italy when he came to settle there. Eventually, they became the guardian deities of Rome.



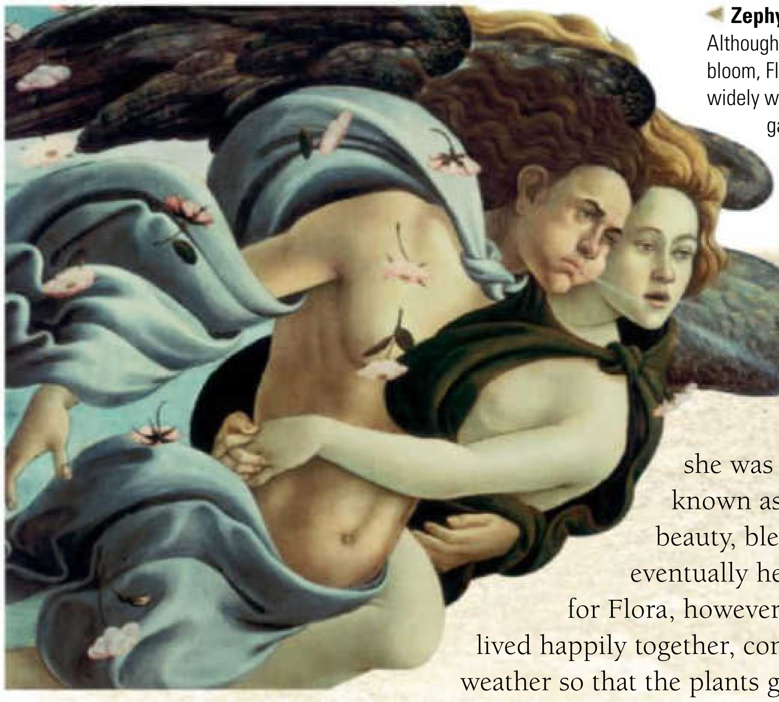
God of the pantry
The Penates were the patron gods of the storeroom and the household. In some Roman homes, it was the custom to move their statues from the home shrine to the dining table when the family were about to eat.



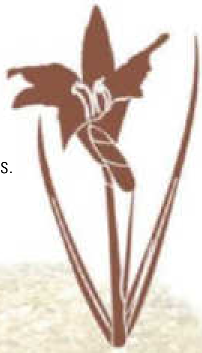
The Dioscuri
Pairs of deities were dear to the Romans. The divine twins Castor and Pollux, also known as the Dioscuri, were revered as protectors of soldiers and sailors.

FERTILITY DEITIES

Ensuring a regular food supply for their huge population was of vital importance to the Romans. Hence, many of their deities were patrons of vineyard-keepers, shepherds, farmers, and others who produced food for the people. They included Lupercus, who protected herds and flocks from wolves, Ops, who was the goddess of the harvest, and Liber, who ruled over the vines and fields. Most of these deities had existed in Italy before the Romans built up their empire, and were later included in the Roman pantheon.



Zephyrus and Flora
Although both helped the plants bloom, Flora was the more widely worshipped, and special games, the Floralia, were held in her honour.



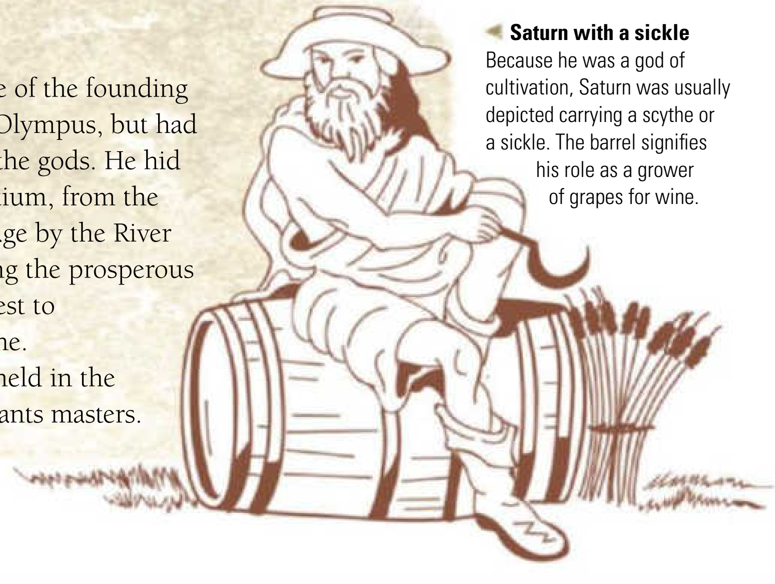
Spring flower
Flora's greatest gift to humankind, remembered especially in the spring, was the seeds of many different species of flowers.

FLORA

The goddess of springtime, flowers, and fertility, Flora is usually portrayed as an attractive young nymph carrying a bunch of flowers. At first she was shy and retiring, but Zephyrus, the west wind (also known as Favonius), caught sight of her and, enchanted by her beauty, blew in her direction. She ran from him in fright, but eventually he caught her and made love to her. The story ended well for Flora, however, because soon Zephyrus made her his wife and the pair lived happily together, combining their abilities to bring fertile soil and favourable weather so that the plants grew and the flowers bloomed.

SATURN

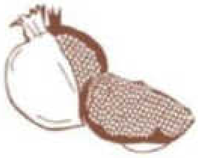
Saturn (the Roman version of the Greek god Cronus) was one of the founding deities of the Roman people. He had been a deity on Mount Olympus, but had quarrelled with Jupiter, who expelled him from the home of the gods. He hid in Italy, and the place where he settled became known as Latium, from the Latin word meaning "to hide". It was said that he built a village by the River Tiber, on the site where Rome was later to stand. Here, during the prosperous time known as the Golden Age, he showed the locals how best to cultivate the ground and how to grow vines and produce wine.
The Romans worshipped him at a festival called Saturnalia, held in the month of December, when masters became servants and servants masters.

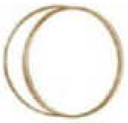


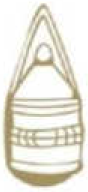
Saturn with a sickle
Because he was a god of cultivation, Saturn was usually depicted carrying a scythe or a sickle. The barrel signifies his role as a grower of grapes for wine.

THE GREAT MOTHER

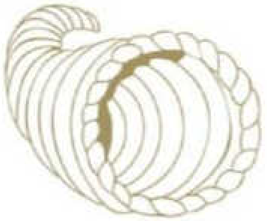
The Great Mother was also known as Bona Dea ("the good goddess"). She was variously identified with Ops, Fauna, and the nature goddess Cybele. Some say she was the mother of Faunus (*see right*), and was a modest, shy deity who had the gift of prophecy, but would tell her predictions only to women. It is believed that she began life as a mortal. She drank a lot of wine one day and got drunk. When Faunus saw the state she was in, he was enraged and killed her, after which she became an immortal and a special guardian of Rome. But in the form of Cybele she was more a goddess of sexuality.

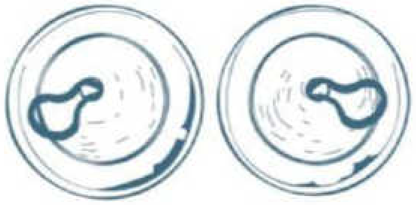

Pomegranate

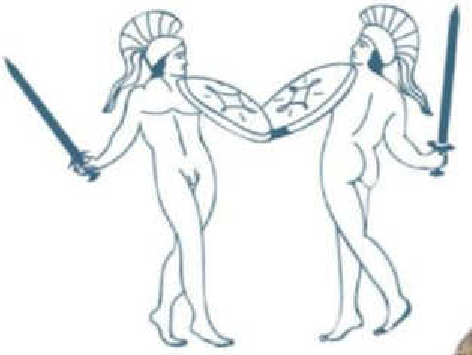

Tambourine


Amphora

Cybele's attributes
Since Cybele was also the goddess of fertility, the pomegranate, the horn of plenty (cornucopia), and the amphora were her special attributes. The cymbals and the tambourine were played at the frenzied dances during her festival.


Horn of plenty


Cymbals

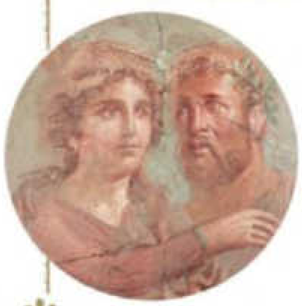


Armed dance of the Corybantes
The worshippers of Cybele were known as the Corybantes. They used to dance ecstatically to music in her honour, sometimes slashing one another with their swords.

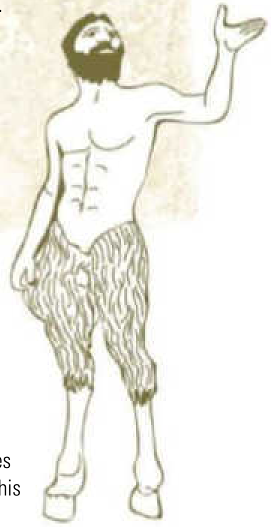
Cybele
The nature goddess Cybele usually rode a chariot drawn by lions, which were symbolic of her complete dominion over the powerful forces of nature.

FAUNUS

Faunus was worshipped as the patron of agriculture and the protector of shepherds. One day he saw Hercules (the Greek hero Heracles) with Omphale, his mistress. Faunus fell passionately in love with Omphale and decided to follow the couple. When Hercules and Omphale took shelter for the night in a cave, Faunus crept in after them and, when all was still, slid in quietly beside Omphale. When he touched her he was astounded to feel a hairy chest and strong arms – the couple had swapped clothes for the night. Hercules pushed him from the bed and the pair burst out laughing.



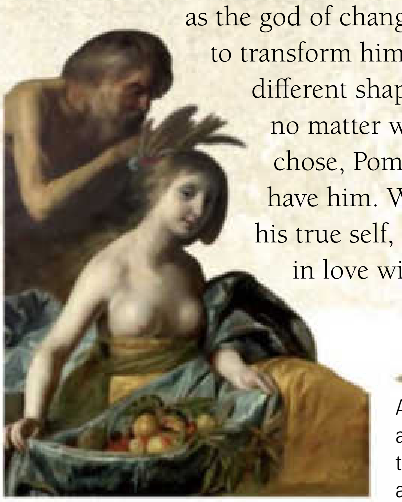
Hercules and Omphale
Omphale was a queen from Lydia who was deeply in love with Hercules.



Faunus
After his encounter with Hercules and Omphale, Faunus preferred his devotees to worship him naked.

POMONA AND VERTUMNUS

Pomona, a beautiful nymph who was also a skilled gardener, was the goddess of fruit trees. Vertumnus was a deity who presided over all kinds of change, including the turning seasons and the transformation from blossom to fruit. Vertumnus was attracted to Pomona when he saw her pruning her trees and, as the god of change, he decided to transform himself into many different shapes to woo her. But no matter what disguise he chose, Pomona would not have him. When he showed his true self, however, she fell in love with him.



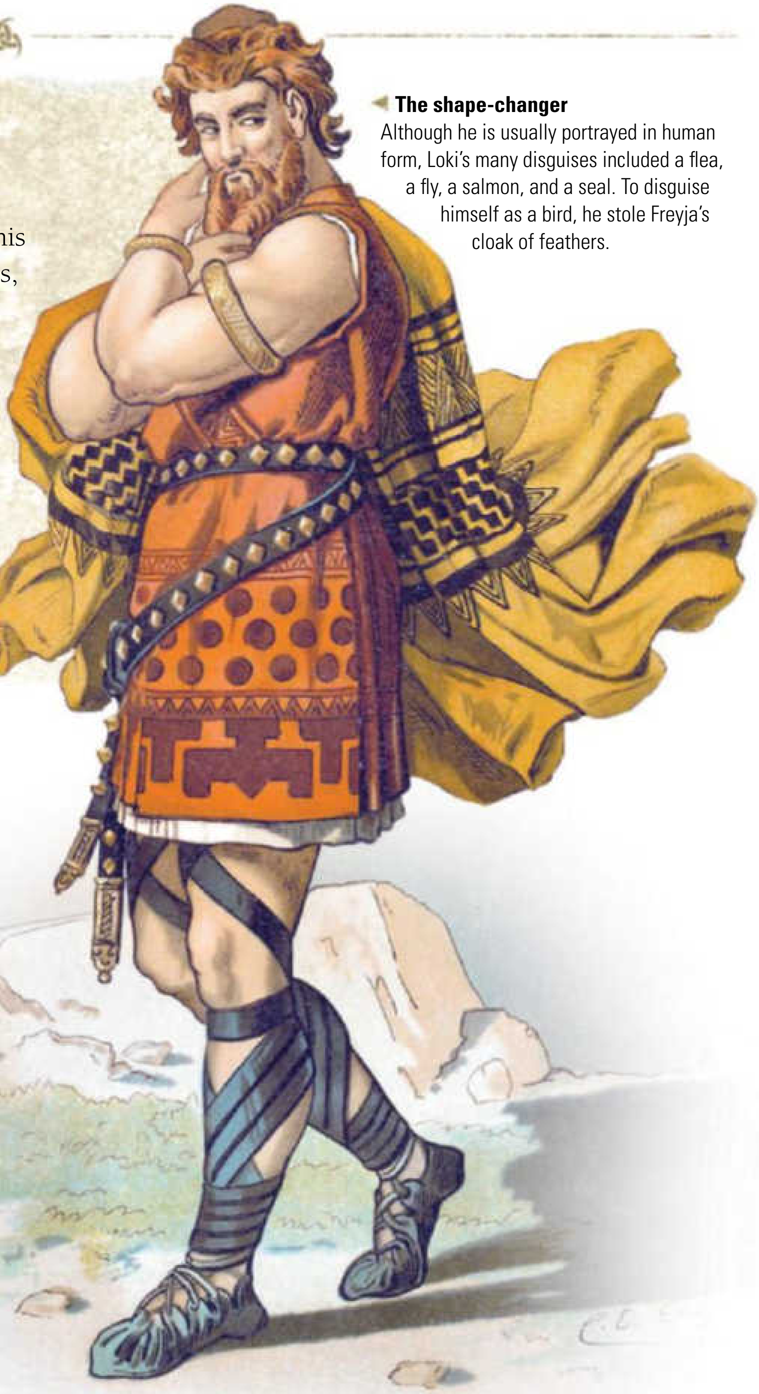
Guardians of the fruit
After their union, Pomona and Vertumnus nurtured the trees together, thus ensuring a bountiful harvest of fruit.

LOKI

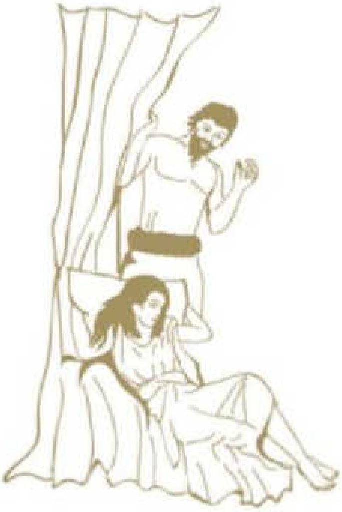
Loki was the trickster of the Norse pantheon and the husband of the goddess Sigyn. He represented disorder, mischief-making, and irrationality, and always stood in the way of those who wanted to bring order and calm to the universe. Some said he interfered in the lives of humans too, and he was often blamed for giving ordinary people the desires and passions that caused problems in their lives. A shape-changer with an insatiable sexual appetite, his tricks ranged from simple pranks to cold-blooded murders.

THE TRICKS OF LOKI

A blood brother of Odin, Loki had three wives who bore him many children, but this was not enough for him. So he used his power of shape-changing to have affairs with goddesses, giants, humans, and animals. Loki also had a rapacious appetite for food, and even killed a dwarf called Otr for the salmon that he had caught. However, he occasionally used his trickery to help the gods. For instance, he hatched a plot to retrieve Thor's hammer, which had been stolen by the giant Thrym. The giant was willing to return the hammer only if the gods let him marry the goddess Freyja. So Loki suggested that Thor disguise himself as Freyja and go to the wedding dressed as a bride. Before the ceremony, Thrym brought out the hammer and Thor snatched it from him.

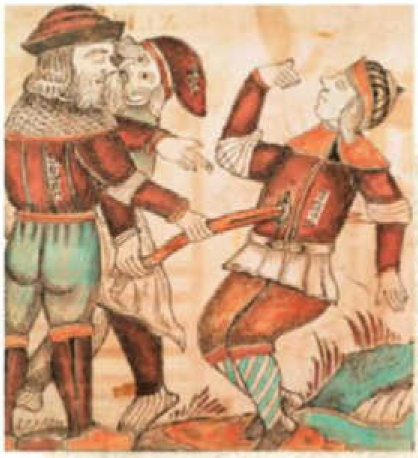


The shape-changer
Although he is usually portrayed in human form, Loki's many disguises included a flea, a fly, a salmon, and a seal. To disguise himself as a bird, he stole Freyja's cloak of feathers.



Loki and Sif
When Loki cut off the golden hair of the corn goddess Sif, the crops would not ripen. Sif's husband, Thor, threatened to kill Loki as a result.

Skilled Norse dwarfs
Norse dwarfs were skilled craftsmen. When Thor threatened Loki for cutting Sif's hair, the trickster persuaded a dwarf to make new hair for the goddess.

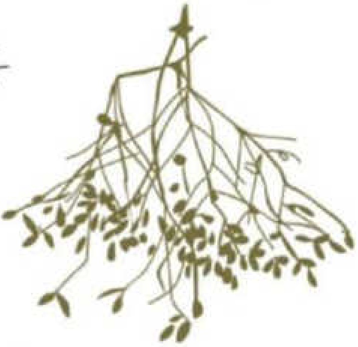


Balder's murder
Höd was pleased when Loki helped him aim the dart made of mistletoe, but devastated when he learned that he had killed Balder, his brother.

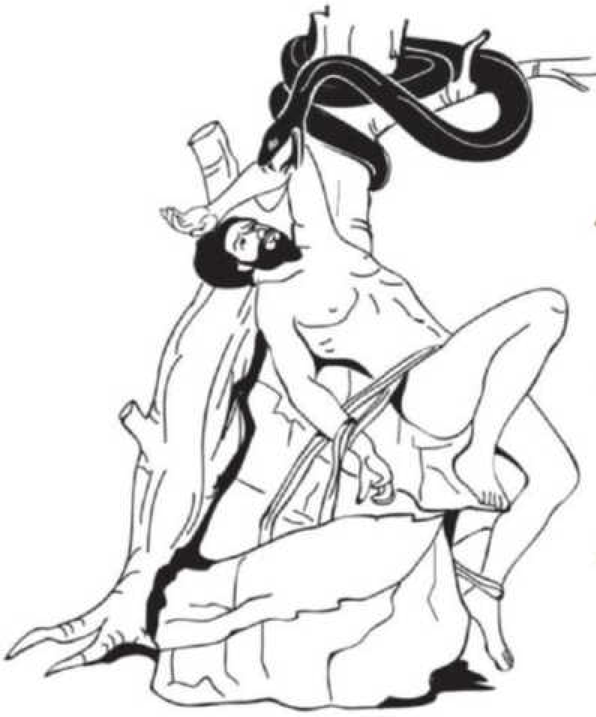
THE DEATH OF BALDER

Balder was the son of Odin and Frigg, and the most handsome of all the gods. One night he had a dream that he would die. When Frigg found out about it, she made every living thing – animals, trees, and plants – promise not to harm her son. But while doing this, the goddess forgot to ask one plant, the mistletoe. Assuming that Balder was invincible, the gods often used him as a target for knife-throwing and archery. One day, they were hurling around all kinds of objects, such as rocks and branches. Loki had craftily learned from Frigg the secret that Balder was not immune to the mistletoe. He sharpened a twig of mistletoe to make a dart, placed it in the hand of the blind god Höd and helped Höd aim it at Balder. The dart pierced Balder's heart and killed him.

> HANDSOME IN APPEARANCE, WICKED IN CHARACTER, AND VERY CHANGEABLE IN HIS WAYS.
>
> Snorri Sturluson, *Prose Edda,* c.1220



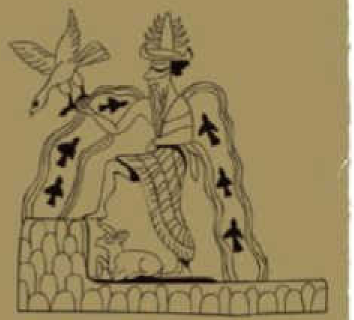
Mistletoe
The evergreen plant mistletoe, which bears fruit in the winter, is often regarded as a symbol of new birth. Ironically, it caused the death of Balder, beloved of the gods.



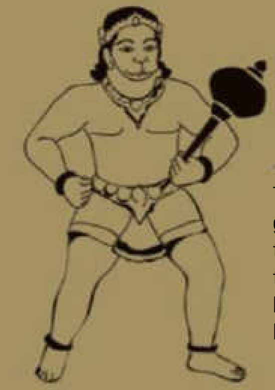
The punishment of Loki
Loki was punished for causing Balder's death by being bound with the entrails of his son. The giantess Skadi placed a snake above him, which dripped venom onto him.

TRICKSTERS FROM OTHER CULTURES

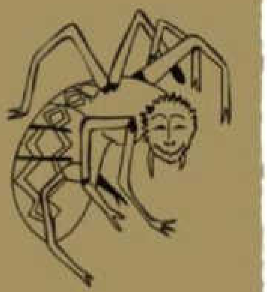
Most mythologies have a trickster figure, a god who likes to play pranks on other deities or cause widespread chaos. These figures often have a large appetite for sex, food, and mischief. Such tricksters are usually a source of great amusement, but their pranks, like many of Loki's, can also have serious consequences. Some tricksters are also heroes, and carry out brave deeds, like the Hindu god Hanuman. They may also be culture heroes, figures who bring the skills of civilization – such as fire-making, cooking, and medicine – to the human race.



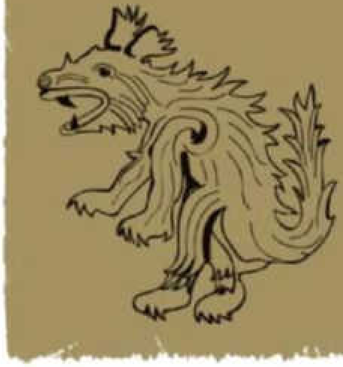
Enki
The creator god of Mesopotamia was also a trickster with an insatiable sexual appetite that even extended to his own daughter and granddaughter.



Hanuman
The son of the Hindu wind god Vayu, Hanuman once tried to swallow the sun. A trickster in his youth, he later became a staunch devotee of Lord Rama.



Ananse
This West African spider god was credited with teaching humans such skills as fire-making, but he was also an incorrigible trickster.



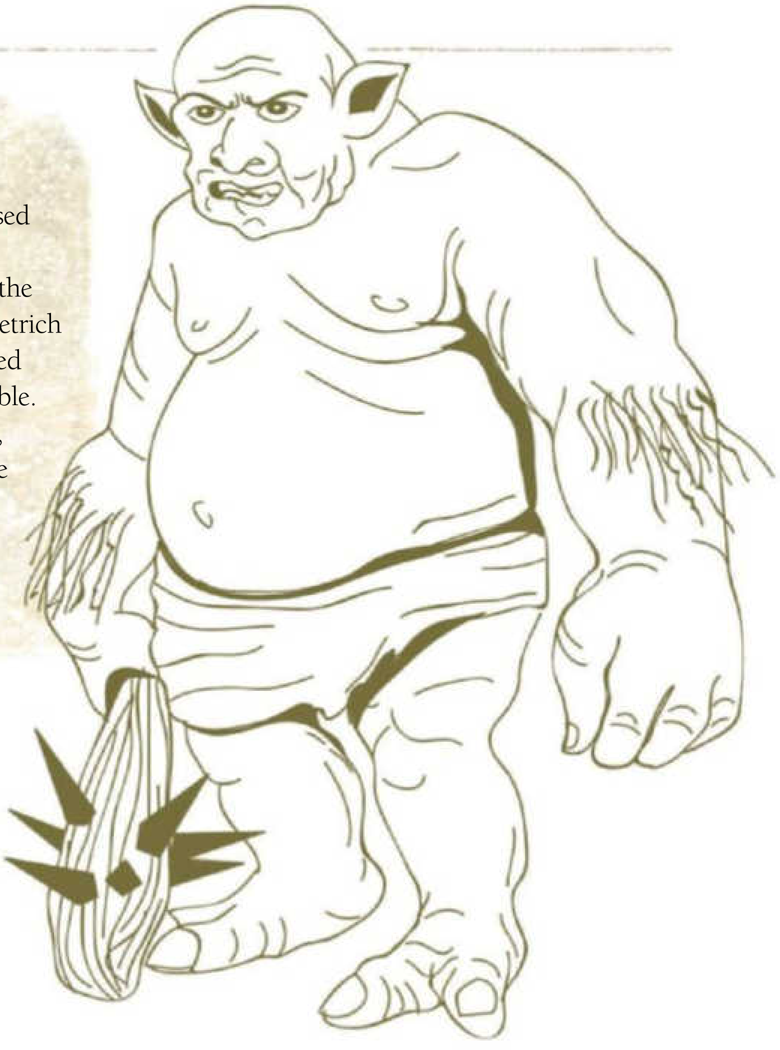
Coyote
Appearing in many North American myths, Coyote loved making mischief and once blew out the light of the moon.

TALES OF HEROISM AND CHIVALRY

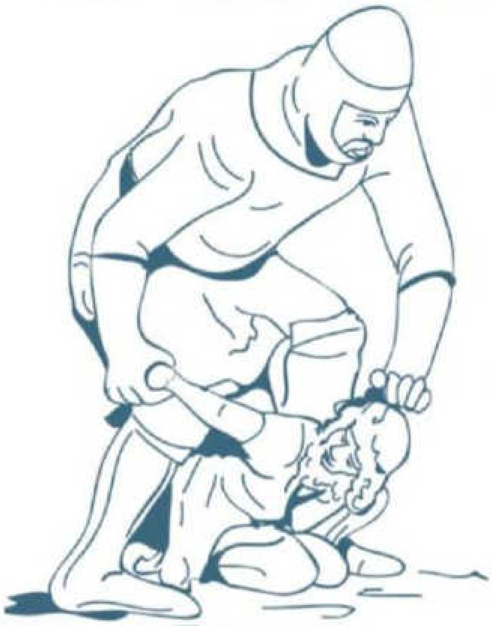
The period that followed the decline of the Roman Empire (from the 5th century onwards) was a rich time for myths and legends in Europe. As new rulers began to expand their territories by conquest, tales of military heroism and chivalry became popular, and sword-wielding heroes – men who were strong, proud, and brave, and who sometimes had to deal with supernatural foes – feature in many of these stories. There were heroines too, who often struggled to make their mark in a world dominated by men.

THE ADVENTURES OF DIETRICH

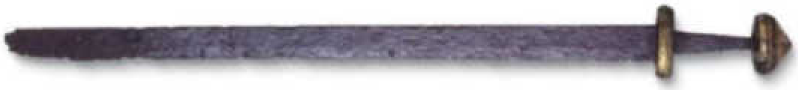
Dietrich was a figure from a German medieval legend, supposedly based on Theodoric (454–526), the King of the Ostrogoths. He had many adventures in his youth. When a dwarf-king named Laurin abducted the maiden Kunhild, Dietrich decided to rescue her. Fighting valiantly, Dietrich overpowered Laurin, but graciously spared his life. The dwarf rewarded Dietrich by giving him a sword so well forged it was virtually unbeatable. Among Dietrich's other enemies was a giant called Grim, and his wife, Hilde. Dietrich killed the giant, who had robbed many people, but the giantess trapped Dietrich's companion, Hildebrand. Dietrich cut Hilde in two, but she healed magically. This happened many times until Hildebrand suggested that Dietrich force his foot between the two halves. Thus, Hilde was killed and Hildebrand freed.



► **Grim the giant**
Many legends of Northern Europe speak of giants, who are usually fearsome, strong, and warlike, but not too intelligent. Dietrich engaged Grim in a long-drawn-out conflict before killing the giant with his sword.



◄ **Dietrich and Laurin**
Dwarfs made up for their small size with their fine weapons and excellent skills in battle. Laurin the dwarf was a formidable opponent, even for a man who was as strong and as brave as Dietrich.

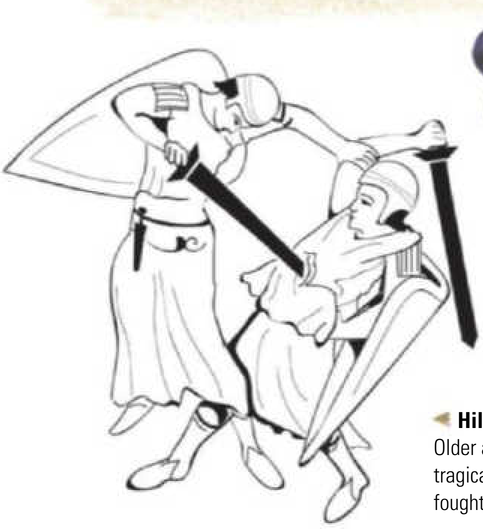


▲ **Broadswords**
Among the weapons commonly used in Europe from the 5th century onwards were strong broadswords, usually held in two hands to make powerful slashing strokes in battle.

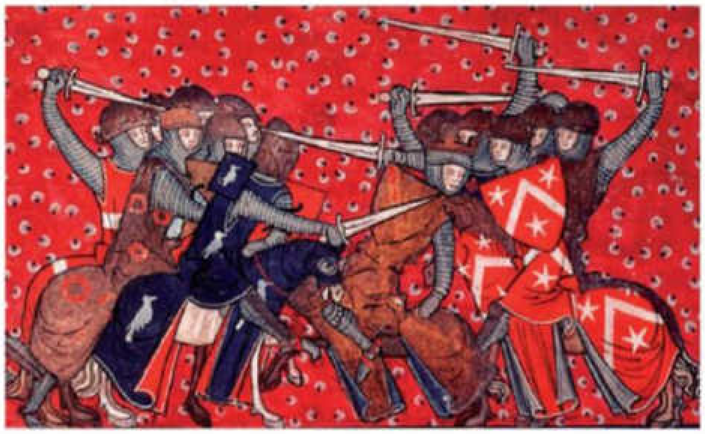
THE DEATH OF HADUBRAND

Dietrich had to fight Odoacer, the ruler of Italy, to win his kingdom. Before the battle, some soldiers from Odoacer's army challenged a few of Dietrich's men to single combat; one such challenge was issued to Dietrich's warrior, Hildebrand, by a young follower of Odoacer. When Hildebrand questioned his challenger, it became clear that the young man was in fact Hildebrand's long-lost son, Hadubrand, whom Hildebrand had not seen since he was a baby. But Hadubrand had been told that his father was dead and refused to believe that he was alive, even when Hildebrand offered his son a gold ring from the family's treasures. Finally, their tempers raised, the two men fought, and Hadubrand was killed.

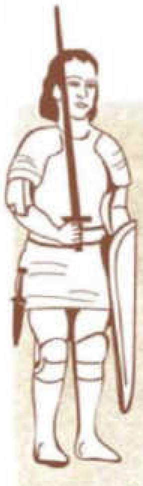
▲ **Gold ring**
Hildebrand's offer of his ring reflected the medieval European tradition of fathers handing down their treasure to their sons.



◄ **Hildebrand and Hadubrand**
Older and more experienced, Hildebrand tragically killed his own son when they fought, as he was more skilled in battle.



▲ **The Battle of Roncevaux**
After a prolonged and valiant battle at the Roncevaux Pass, the knight Roland finally summoned help. Emperor Charlemagne arrived to defeat the enemy, but was too late to save Roland.



Roland the brave

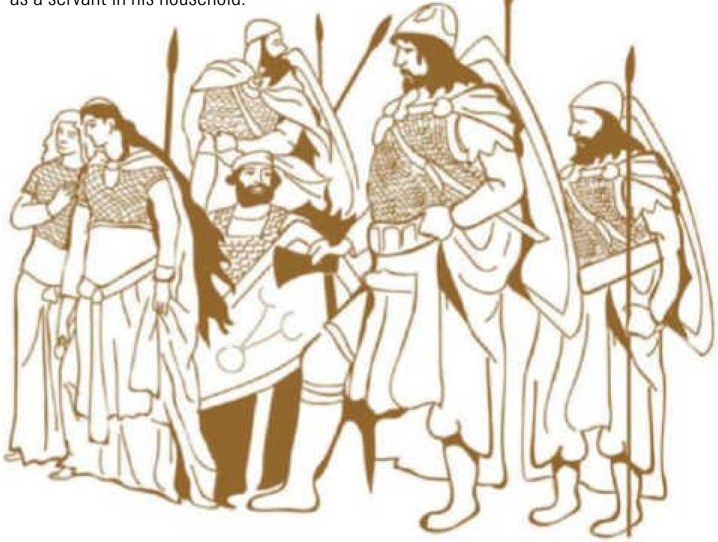
ROLAND AND OLIVER

Emperor Charlemagne ruled over the Frankish kingdoms in Europe in the 8th and early 9th centuries. One of his knights, Roland, was widely known for his bravery in battle. Once, legend has it, he duelled with another knight for five days without knowing his opponent's identity; he finally realized he was fighting his best friend, Oliver, with whom he then made peace. Later, when leading the rearguard of the emperor's army at the Battle of Roncevaux (c.778), Roland did not pay heed to Oliver's advice to blow his horn and summon help if needed, and was thus killed in battle.

GUDRUN AND HER SUITORS

Gudrun was a Netherlandish princess, daughter of Hetel and sister of Ortwin. She refused two suitors, Siegfried and Hartmut, but a third suitor, the brave knight Herwig, gained her favour. When Siegfried found out about this, he launched an attack on Herwig, and Hetel and Ortwin put on their armour and rode to aid Herwig in battle. Meanwhile, Hartmut, seeing that both his rival suitors were occupied in battle, rode to Hetel's castle and abducted Gudrun. Hartmut and his family then tried to persuade Gudrun to marry him, but the spirited princess staunchly refused, so they forced her to do menial work. When Siegfried came to know of Hartmut's intentions, he made a truce with Herwig, and the three knights – Hetel, Herwig, and Siegfried – banded together to rescue Gudrun.

▼ **Gudrun's abduction**
An unwilling Gudrun was forcibly taken by Hartmut and his men, and made to work as a servant in his household.



BEOWULF

The life of the hero Beowulf is depicted in the great Anglo-Saxon poem of the same name, a work that champions the values of honour, valour, and friendship. The poem begins with the story of young Beowulf, a warrior of the Geats, a people from southern Sweden. He is a man with the strength and courage to defeat the most terrible opponents. *Beowulf* goes on to describe how the hero slays the monsters that terrorize the Danes. Later, he becomes the Geatish king and enjoys a long reign before facing his final challenge and a heroic death.

THE MYTH

As a young man, Beowulf travelled to Denmark. For many years, King Hrothgar of Denmark and his people had been terrorized by a monster called Grendel. It would break into Hrothgar's palace hall at night, kill some of the sleeping warriors, and carry them off for food. Beowulf offered to fight the monster, and laid a trap for Grendel, mortally wounding the creature, and eventually killing it. King Hrothgar was overjoyed and bestowed many gifts on Beowulf.

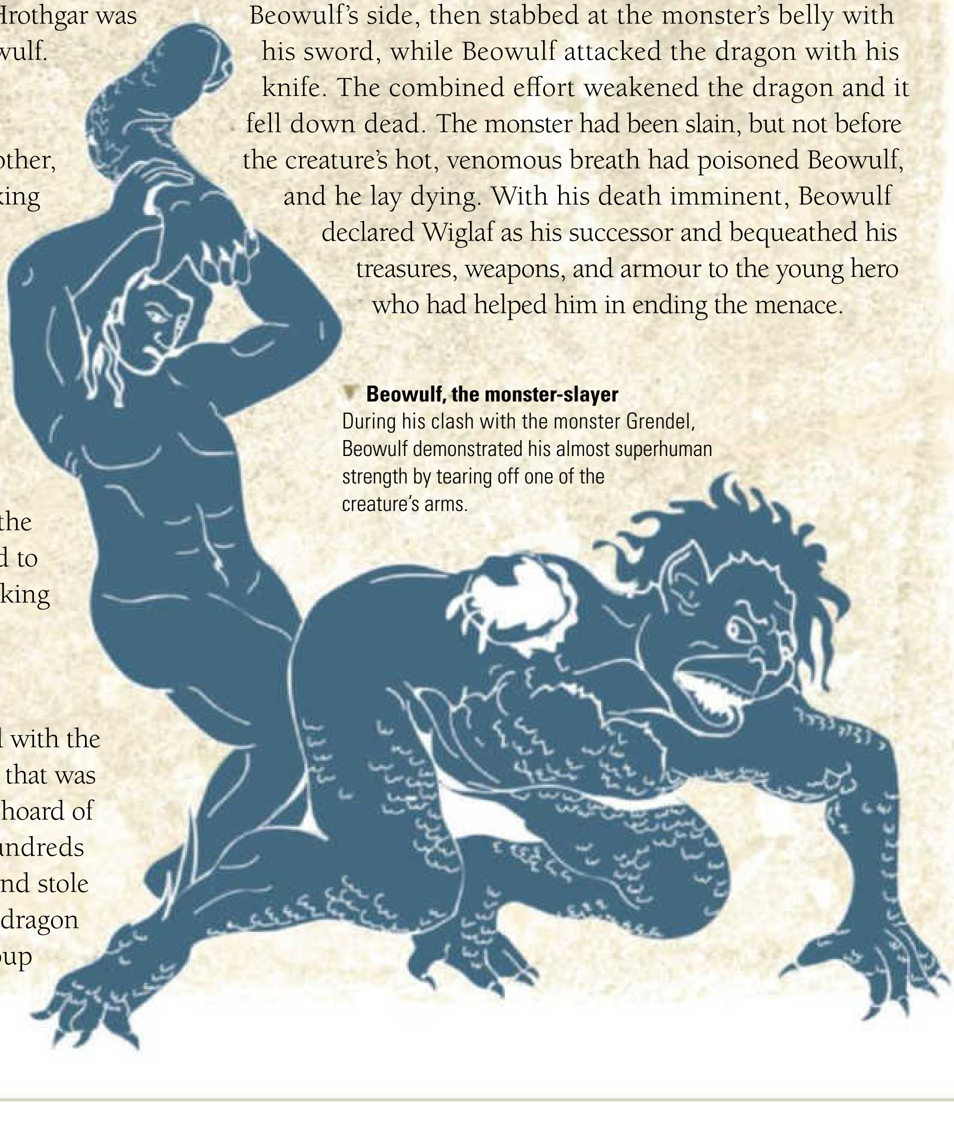
GRENDEL'S MOTHER

Grendel's death infuriated his monstrous mother, and she attacked the people in Heorot, seeking revenge. She lived in a lake, so Beowulf dived into its murky depths to challenge and fight her. It was a long, hard struggle for Beowulf because he could not manage to penetrate the monster's thick, scaly hide with his sword. In the end, he was able to take a weapon from the creature's armoury and stab her with it, killing the monster and ensuring peace for the Danes. After this triumph, Beowulf returned to the land of the Geats, where he was made king and ruled his people for 50 years.

BEOWULF AND THE DRAGON

When Beowulf was an old man, he was faced with the prospect of battling yet another monster, one that was attacking the Geats. A dragon had guarded a hoard of treasure in an ancient burial mound for hundreds of years. When a thief entered the mound and stole a precious cup from the hoard, the enraged dragon went on the rampage. So Beowulf and a group of his bravest warriors set out to confront the beast. Beowulf carried a strong metal shield to protect himself from the dragon's hot breath, but his sword was unable to pierce the beast's scaly skin. His warriors began to desert him one at a time, fleeing in terror, and it seemed that Beowulf would be defeated when the dragon grabbed him by the neck.

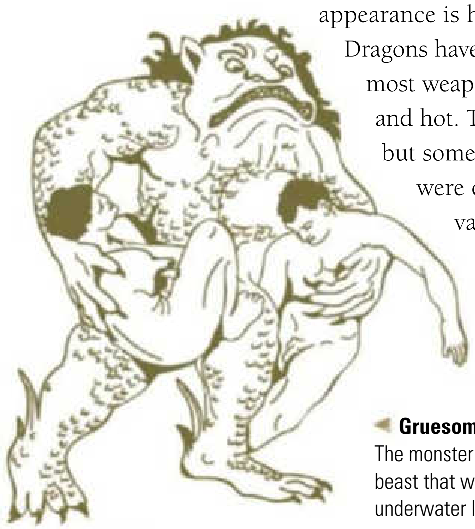
A faithful warrior named Wiglaf, who had remained by Beowulf's side, then stabbed at the monster's belly with his sword, while Beowulf attacked the dragon with his knife. The combined effort weakened the dragon and it fell down dead. The monster had been slain, but not before the creature's hot, venomous breath had poisoned Beowulf, and he lay dying. With his death imminent, Beowulf declared Wiglaf as his successor and bequeathed his treasures, weapons, and armour to the young hero who had helped him in ending the menace.



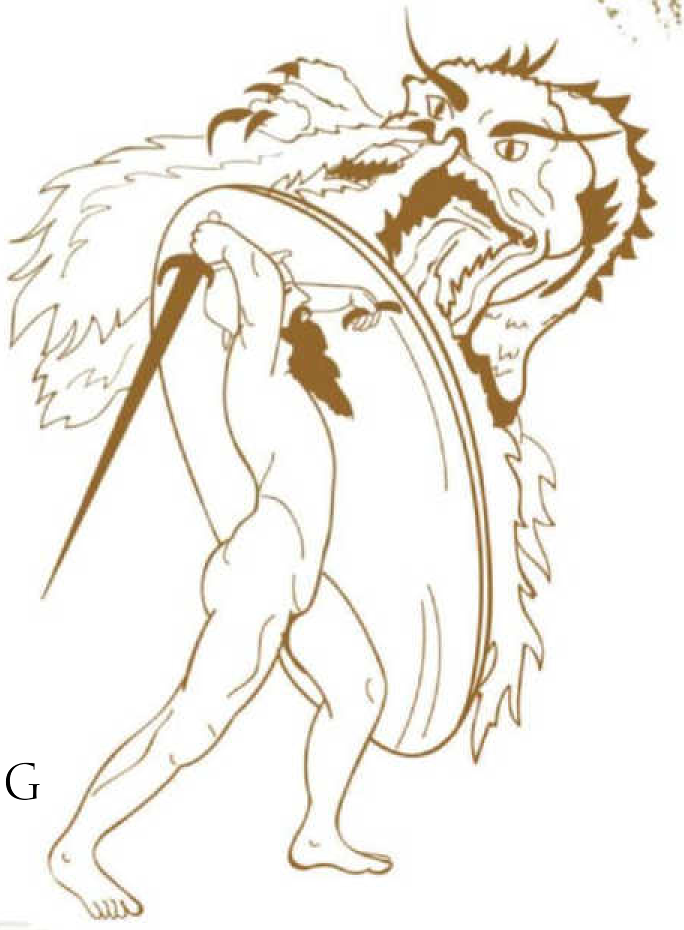
▼ **Beowulf, the monster-slayer**
During his clash with the monster Grendel, Beowulf demonstrated his almost superhuman strength by tearing off one of the creature's arms.

MONSTERS

The monsters in *Beowulf* and in other Northern European myths are creatures whose strength exceeds that of ordinary human warriors. They lurk in dark places, such as the bottom of the lake where Grendel's mother had her lair, and their very appearance is hideous enough to frighten most people. Dragons have a thick, scaly skin, which is invulnerable to most weapons, and they breathe fire, which is poisonous and hot. Their form is often described as serpent-like, but some also have wings. In general, these creatures were conceived to emphasize the heroism of the valiant warriors who defeated them. But in *Beowulf*, there is also a Christian tone to the poem; the monsters are seen as heathen or non-Christian creatures that fight the heroes, who are godly and righteous.



◄ **Gruesome Grendel**
The monster Grendel is often portrayed as a hideous beast that would carry off its Danish victims to an underwater lair and subsequently feed on them.



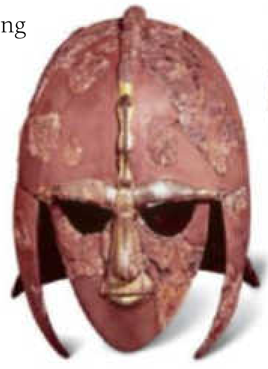
▲ **Slaying the dragon**
It took two heroes, Beowulf and Wiglaf, to kill the dragon that attacked the Geats. By staying by his leader's side, Wiglaf showed that he was a true hero, brave and loyal enough to inherit the Geatish throne.

> WIDE WAS THE DRAGON'S WARRING SEEN, ITS FIENDISH FURY FAR AND NEAR, AS THE GRIM DESTROYER THOSE GEATISH PEOPLE HATED AND HOUNDED.
>
> *Beowulf*, c.11th century

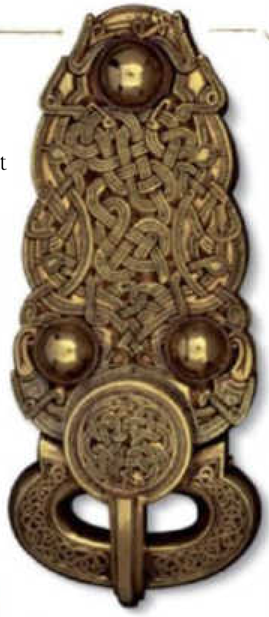
BURIAL TREASURE

Anglo-Saxon poetry mentions treasures such as rings and jewels, which a king would bestow on his bravest warriors. Also, when great Anglo-Saxon kings died, they were buried with some of their treasures. The largest such collection of precious items was unearthed at a ship burial at Sutton Hoo in eastern England in 1939. This was the grave of an unknown East Anglian king (possibly Redwald, who died c.627), and the collection had both Christian and non-Christian items, showing a mixture of beliefs.

Anglo-Saxon coins



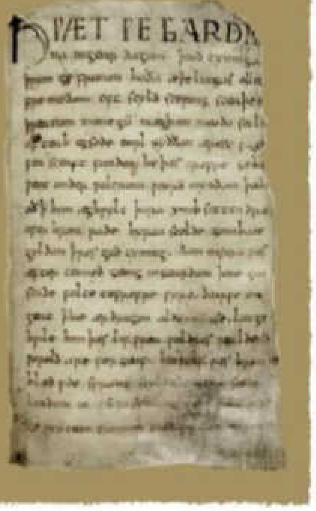
Anglo-Saxon helmet



▲ **Sutton Hoo treasure**
Besides the gilt bronze helmet, coins, and gold buckle (above), the Sutton Hoo burial contained a jewelled sword, a royal sceptre, silver dishes, and drinking vessels.

THE ANGLO-SAXONS

After the Romans left Britain in the 5th century CE, the southern part of the country was ruled by invaders from northern Germany and Denmark, who came to be called the Anglo-Saxons. Their language, known as Anglo-Saxon or Old English, was a Germanic tongue that later evolved into modern English. Anglo-Saxon monks and scholars used Old English to compose works of prose, riddles, a history book called the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and poems on heroic and religious subject matter.



Beowulf manuscript (10th century)

LEGENDS OF THE RING

The stories of the Scandinavian hero Sigurd ("Siegfried" in later German versions) involve adventure, warfare, and love, and characters as diverse as heroes, dwarfs, and shape-changers. Sigurd was a part of the Volsung family, whose members, although related to the god Odin, were mortals. The rich series of narratives about the heroic deeds of Sigurd and the tales of a magical ring caught the imagination of many later artists, writers, and composers.

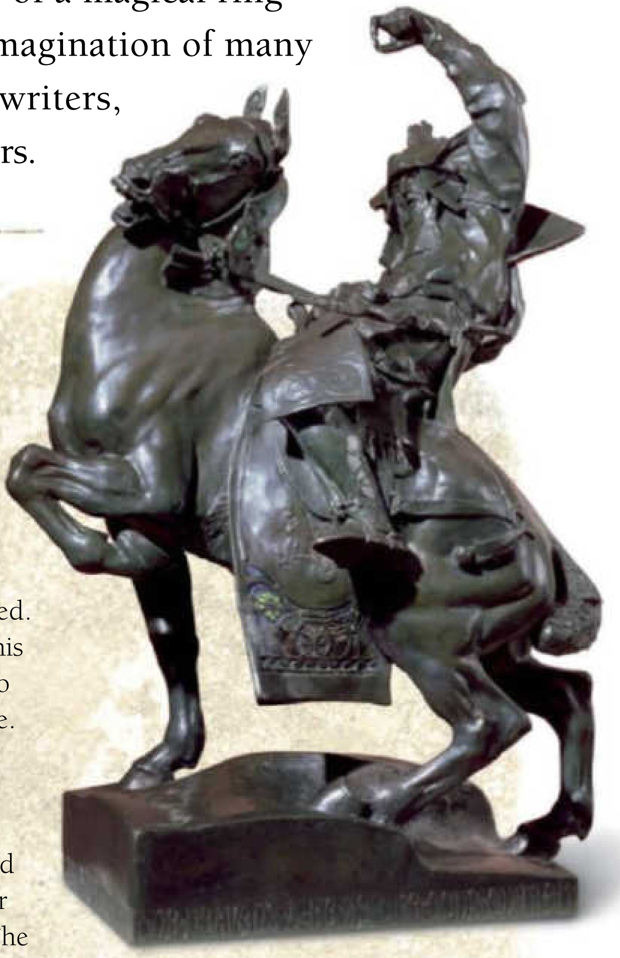
THE MYTH

Sigurd was the son of Sigmund, a heroic follower and descendant of Odin. When Sigmund was killed in battle, Odin smashed the dead hero's sword into fragments, but these were saved by Sigmund's wife, Hjordis, for her son. Hjordis remarried, and Sigurd was brought up by Regin, a skilled but devious blacksmith, who was the brother of the dragon Fafnir and of a shape-changer called Otr.

ANDVARI'S TREASURE

One day, Otr took the form of an otter to fish for salmon. Loki, the trickster god, killed the otter and skinned it because he admired its sleek skin. Otr's father, Hreidmar, was upset and outraged at his son's death, and when Loki, Odin, and Hoenir came to stay with him while travelling, he trapped them in his hall and demanded enough gold to fully cover the otter skin as compensation. Loki went in search of the gold and found it in the hoard of Andvari, a rich dwarf. Andvari's treasure included a ring that had the power to multiply the wealth of its wearer. But the dwarf put a curse on the ring before parting with it. Loki returned with the gold and the gods were freed. Later, Fafnir slew his father, Hreidmar, to obtain the treasure.

◄ **Hoard of gold**
The hoard guarded by Andvari included gold rings, brooches, torcs, necklaces, and other jewellery, all objects highly prized by the Vikings.



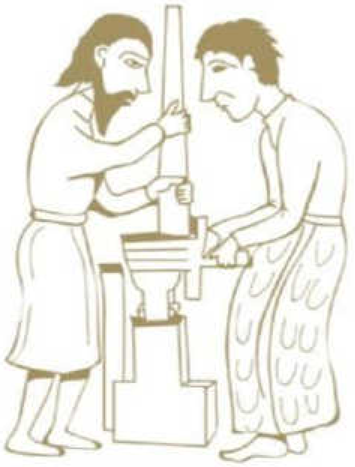
► **Sigurd**
Sigurd became all but invulnerable when he bathed in Fafnir's blood. Only one weak spot remained on Sigurd's shoulder, where a leaf had stuck as he bathed.

SIGURD AND THE RING

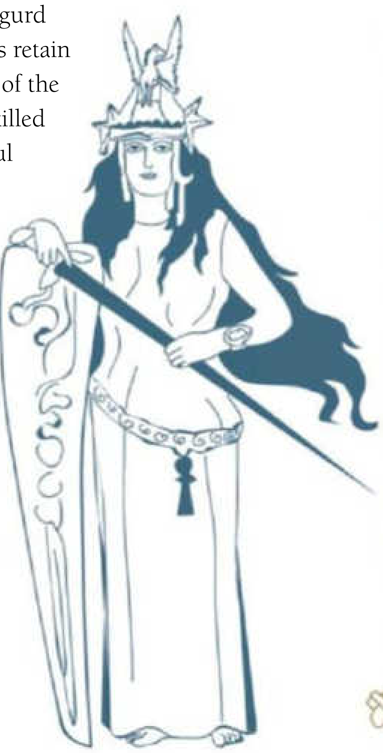
Regin asked Sigurd to challenge Fafnir for the treasure. The blacksmith used the fragments of Sigmund's weapon and forged them into a new sword, which Sigurd used to kill Fafnir. Regin then instructed Sigurd to bathe in the dragon's blood and cook its heart for him. While doing so, Sigurd burned his finger and put it in his mouth. The moment Fafnir's blood touched his tongue, Sigurd was magically able to understand the language of the birds, who warned him that Regin intended to kill him. Sigurd cut off Regin's head and collected the treasure for himself – this included Andvari's cursed ring, which later brought grief and misery to Sigurd. He fell in love with a Valkyrie named Brynhild and gave her the ring. Later, Grimhild, a sorceress, gave Sigurd a potion that made him forget about his betrothal and fall in love with Gudrun, her daughter. Discovering the betrayal, Brynhild had Sigurd killed, but afterwards she repented and threw herself onto Sigurd's funeral pyre.

KEY CHARACTERS

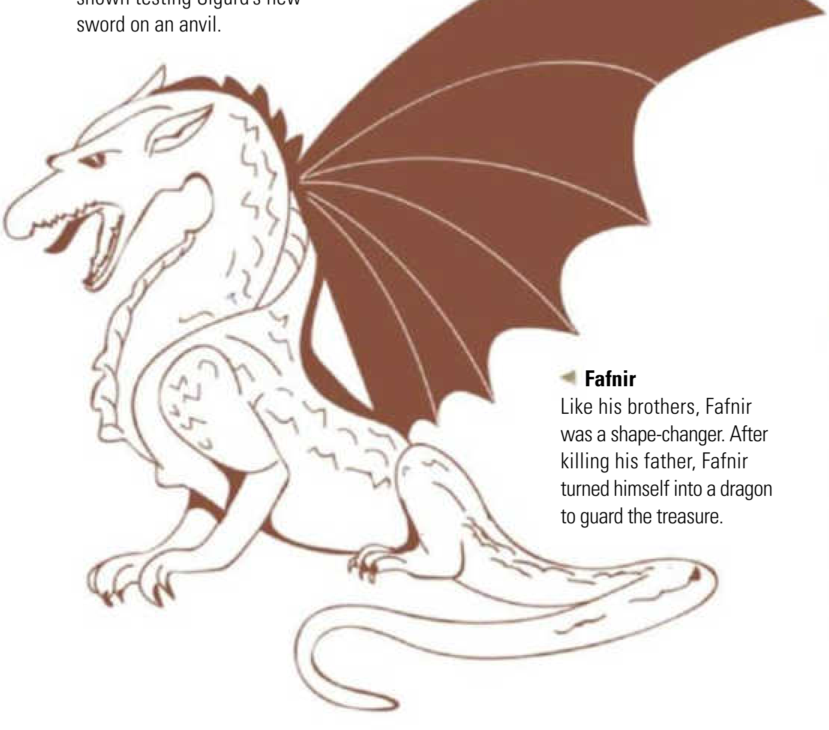
The characters in Sigurd's story were first described in the *Volsunga Saga*, a Norse text from the 13th century. A German poem, the *Nibelungenlied*, which was written at around the same time or soon afterwards, retells the story, changing the names of the characters: the Norse dwarf Andvari becomes Alberich; Regin becomes Mime; Gudrun becomes Kriemhild; and Sigurd becomes Siegfried. But the characters retain their essential traits in both versions of the legend – Sigurd is heroic, Regin is skilled but envious, and Brynhild is beautiful and passionate. The characters also maintain their links with the world of the gods; Sigurd as a member of Odin's family, and Brynhild as one of the Valkyries.



Regin
The blacksmith Regin (*left*) made two failed attempts at forging a sword for Sigurd. Here he is shown testing Sigurd's new sword on an anvil.



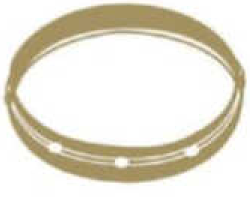
Brynhild
The beautiful Brynhild refused the sexual advances of Odin, who consequently put her to sleep within a ring of fire. Sigurd freed her, but their love was doomed.



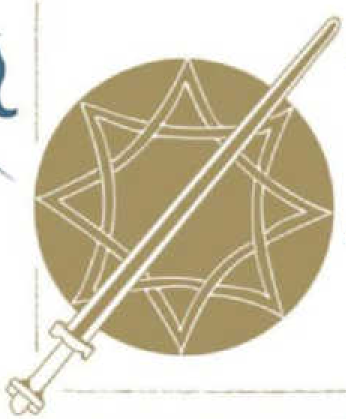
Fafnir
Like his brothers, Fafnir was a shape-changer. After killing his father, Fafnir turned himself into a dragon to guard the treasure.

OBJECTS OF POWER

Metal objects such as jewellery and weapons were believed to be magical in the ancient cultures of Europe. The skill required to make such objects involved the apparently magical processes of smelting, casting, and forging. The metalworker was perceived to have the ability to make substances change shape at will as miraculously as characters such as Loki and Otr. When a ruler gave a sword or a ring to a follower, it was regarded as a gift of immense significance. The owners of such objects trusted implicitly in their powers, which enhanced their courage, strength, and endurance – qualities that were crucial to ensuring success in warfare.



Gold ring
In ancient Europe, men were just as likely to adorn themselves with jewellery as women. It was a sign of their power and wealth.

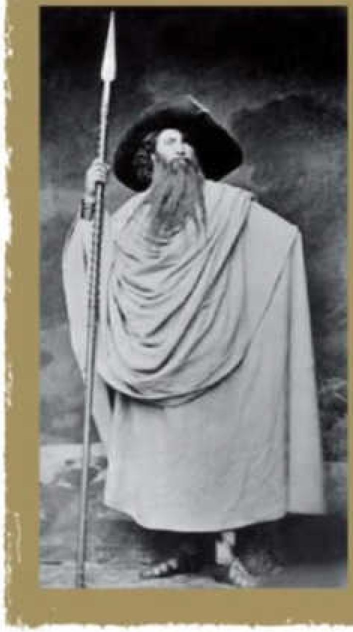


Viking sword and shield
It was important for the Vikings to possess weaponry of the highest standard for a good chance of success on raids.

Horned helmet
The horned helmet, unknown to the Vikings, became common in later Germanic retellings of Norse myths and legends.

LATER INTERPRETATIONS

Icelandic sagas like the story of Sigurd and the ring were very popular in the 19th century, being retold by many writers. William Morris (1834–96) wrote an epic poem *Sigurd the Volsung* that came out in 1876. Perhaps the most influential retelling was in the four operas of the *Ring* cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, by Richard Wagner (1813–83). The first two, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, deal with the back story, including the forging of the ring and the laying of Brynhild to sleep. The next two, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, cover Siegfried's story and its tragic aftermath.



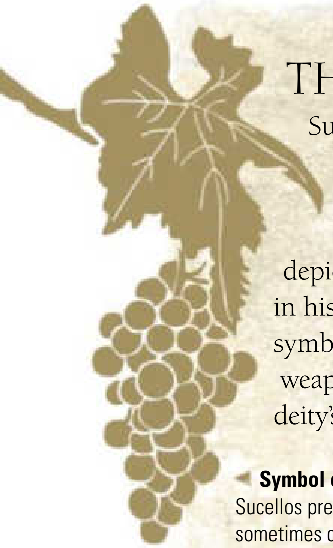
Wotan
In Wagner's operas, the god Odin is called Wotan, and he appears in the first three operas of the *Ring* cycle. This photograph shows actor Franz Betz as Wotan.

MYTHS OF THE ANCIENT CELTS

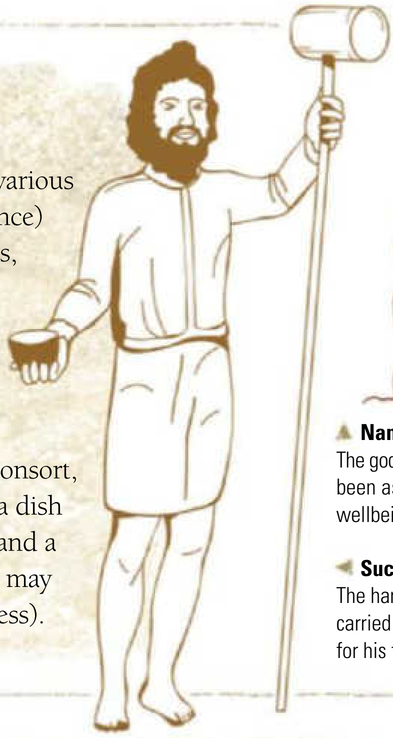
The territory of the ancient Celtic people stretched from Britain, across France and Germany, to Central Europe. Although they were not literate to begin with, these people had a highly developed culture, and excavations of their graves and religious sites show that they worshipped many different gods and goddesses. The Romans, who eventually conquered most of their lands, left descriptions of some of the Celtic deities and religious rituals, and identified many of those deities with their own.

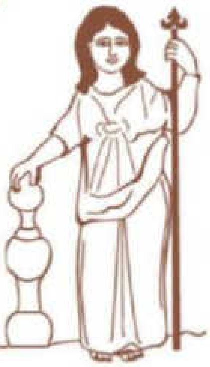
THE GOOD STRIKER

Sucellos, whose name means "the Good Striker", was found in various parts of the Celtic world, especially in Gaul (modern-day France) and Britain. Often said to be a deity of agriculture and forests, his precise significance is still unknown. He is usually depicted as a long-haired, bearded figure, carrying a hammer in his left hand. His main attribute is this hammer, but the symbolism associated with it is unclear; it may have been a weapon, a tool used in one of the crafts, or simply a symbol of the deity's power. Sucellos is generally portrayed as standing with his consort, the goddess Nantosuelta, who carries a dish (perhaps a piece of ritual equipment) and a long pole topped with a house (which may indicate that she was a domestic goddess).



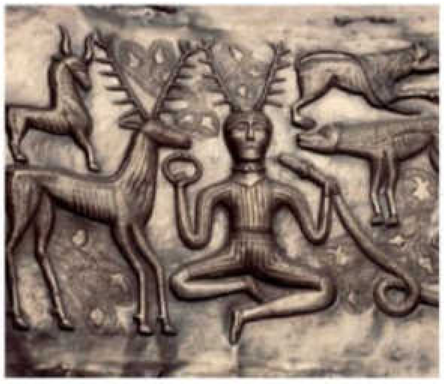
Symbol of Sucellos
Sucellos presided over the grape harvest, sometimes carrying a pot or a barrel to store wine made from the grapes.





Nantosuelta
The goddess Nantosuelta may have been associated with prosperity, wellbeing, and domestic life.

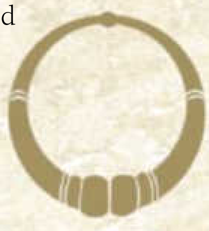
Sucellos's hammer
The hammer or mallet usually carried by Sucellos is the reason for his title, "the Good Striker".



Cernunnos
The Horned God or Cernunnos was often depicted as the "Lord of the Beasts", surrounded by animals that included a bull, stag, wild boar, and serpent.

THE HORNED GOD

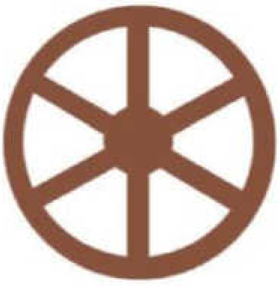
Cernunnos is known as the horned god because he took the form of a man with the horns (and sometimes the hooves and ears) of a stag. He is usually shown with long hair and a beard, often wearing a neck-ring, or torc, which is the Celtic sign of noble birth. Cernunnos seems to have been widely worshipped in Celtic Europe, and was probably a "wild" god like the Classical Pan. His horns suggest that he was a deity of fertility, and to emphasize this point, he was associated with symbols such as the cornucopia (horn of plenty), with fruit, and with containers of grain. This function probably encompassed both sexual fertility and the fecundity of the fields.



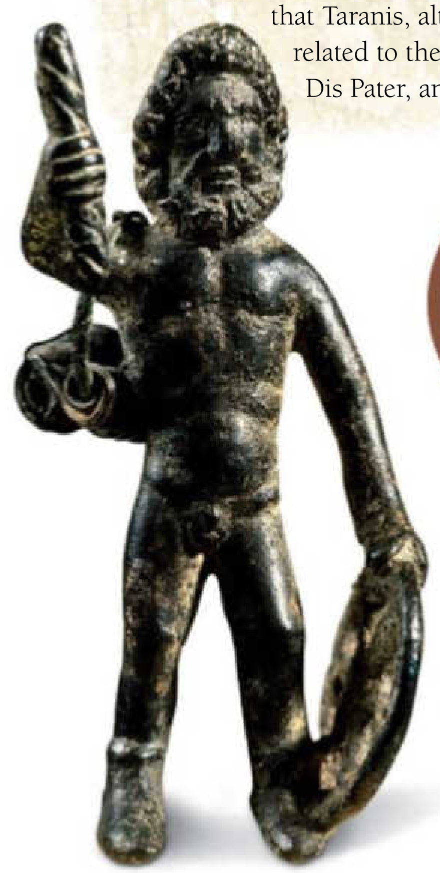
Neck-ring or torc

THE THUNDERER

Taranis was a sky god and a major deity in Celtic Britain; he was apparently much worshipped when the Romans invaded the island in the 1st century CE. Latin writers described him as a god of war and likened him to Jupiter; the common attribute between Taranis and Jupiter being the control of thunder. The Celts also had a sky god who was represented by a wheel or disc and who governed the sun. Sometimes, this wheel god is equated with Taranis. The Romans observed that worshippers of Taranis comprised a cruel cult. The Celts made sacrifices to Taranis, with the offerings sometimes including humans who were burned alive in wooden boats or left to drown in bogs. This form of worship may confirm that Taranis, although a sky god, was related to the Romano-Celtic god Dis Pater, an Underworld deity.



Wheel of Taranis
The spoked wheel, representing both the sun's rays as well as its movement, was used in the Celtic world to represent the sun and its deities, possibly including Taranis.

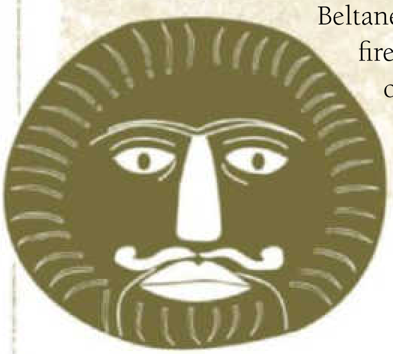


God of the sky
This sky god, with his wheel and lightning bolt, may represent a deity who is a combination of Taranis and Jupiter, the sky god of the invading Romans.

Lightning of the Gods
The Celts considered thunder and lightning to be evidence of the supernatural activity of the gods, and treated places struck by lightning as sacred spots.

GOD OF FIRE AND LIGHT

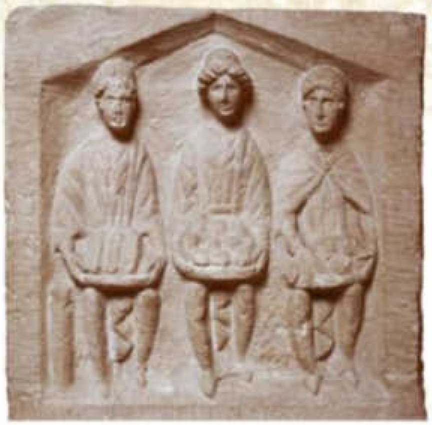
Belenus, also known as Bel or Belus, was a Celtic god of light and the sun. All his names include an element meaning either "bright" or "shining". A widely worshipped deity across much of Europe, Belenus had shrines that were located as far apart as Britain, Austria, and Italy. Being associated with healing as well as the sun, Belenus is also believed to be the Celtic equivalent of Apollo. As with Apollo, some of Belenus's shrines were built near springs, where worshippers went to drink water in the hope of a cure. The springtime feast of Beltane in Celtic Britain, during which fires were lit to mark the lengthening of the days and the better weather, may have been linked with the worship of Belenus.



God of the sun
The lines surrounding Belenus's head may depict the warm, glowing rays of light emanating from the sun god.

TRIPLE DEITIES

The Celts were fascinated by things that came in threes. They made images of bulls with three horns and gods with three faces or heads. The Welsh and Irish wrote triads, poems with three lines that described three concepts. And Celtic legends often speak of people with three sons or daughters. Gods and goddesses also came in groups of three. A number of Celtic carvings and reliefs show a trio of female deities standing together. This trio of goddesses or "triple mother" seems to have been considered particularly powerful by the Celts. They represent both human fertility and the bounty of the Earth, and have dominion over human life and wellbeing. They also seem to symbolize the span of human life – many trios of goddesses take the form of women of different ages.



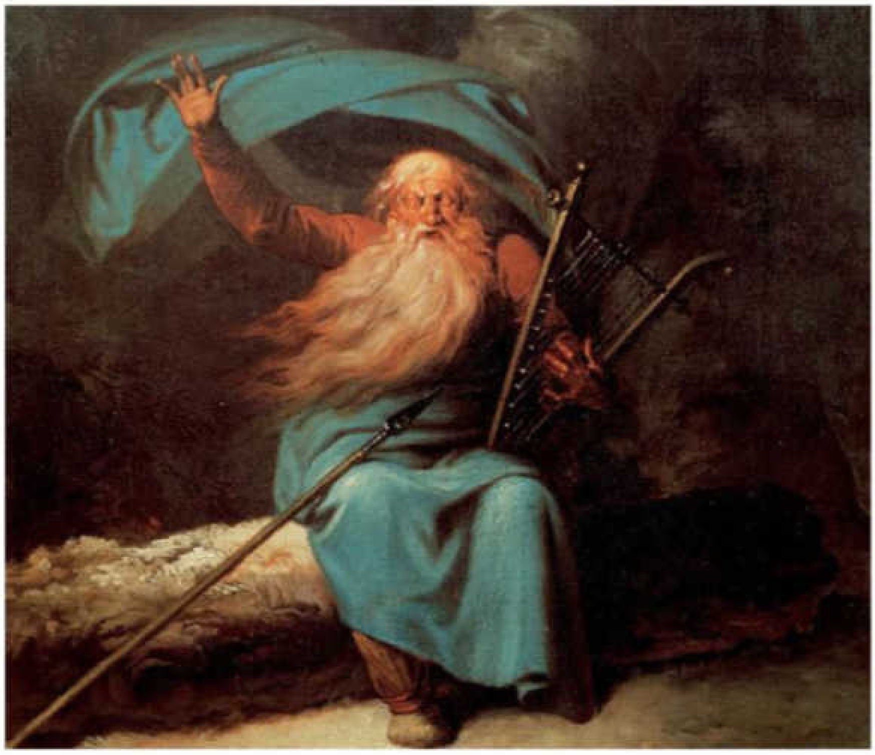
Triple deities
Celtic reliefs often showed the trio of goddesses carrying baskets that probably contained fruits or vegetables, representing the bounty of the Earth.

MAGICAL WORLDS

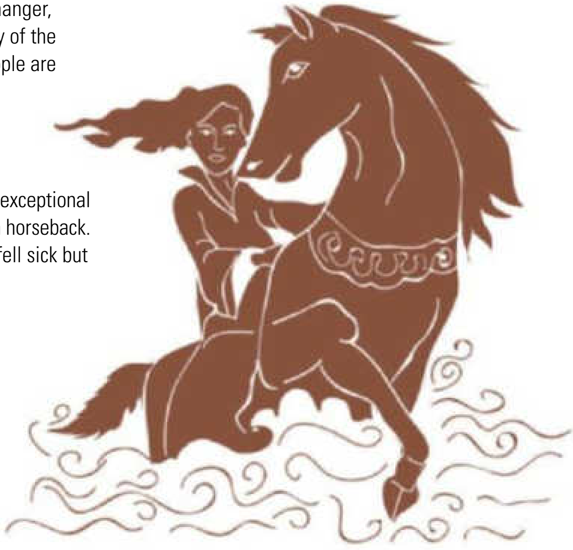
Ancient Celtic literature abounds with stories of people visiting magical worlds that are separate from but close to our own. The denizens of such Otherworlds do not age, and live a pleasant life, free of pain and despair. Time telescopes in their world so that hundreds of human years pass by quickly, unnoticed by the visiting mortals. But, although life in the Otherworld is tranquil and idyllic, visitors generally feel a fatal longing to return home.

THE LAND OF THE YOUNG

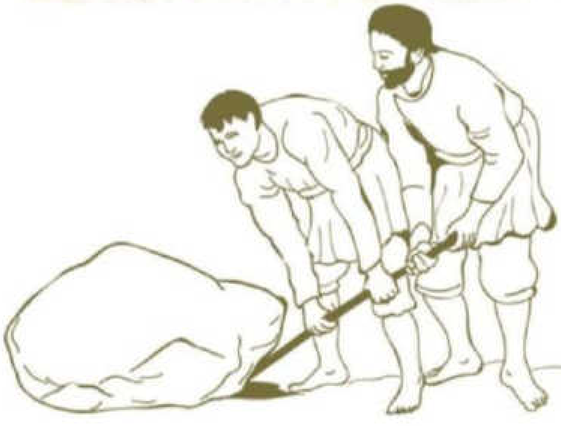
Oisín was the famous son of Finn mac Cool and one of the Fian, a group of warriors who fought for Ireland. Once, when hunting, he met a beautiful woman called Niamh Chinn Óir (Niamh of the Golden Hair), riding a white horse. Niamh professed her love to Oisín and asked him to accompany her to Tir na nÓg, the "Land of the Young", of which she was queen. On the way to this magical world, Oisín killed a giant, and having shown his bravery, was given Niamh as his bride. The couple lived happily for centuries, but Oisín eventually grew homesick and decided to visit Ireland. He discovered that much had changed since his departure. Niamh had warned Oisín not to dismount from his horse in Ireland, but he forgot when he saw some men needing help to lift a boulder. As soon as his feet touched the ground, he became old and died.



▲ **Oisín**
Besides being a warrior and a shape-changer, Oisín was the poet of the Fian, and many of the adventures of Finn mac Cool and his people are told from Oisín's point of view.



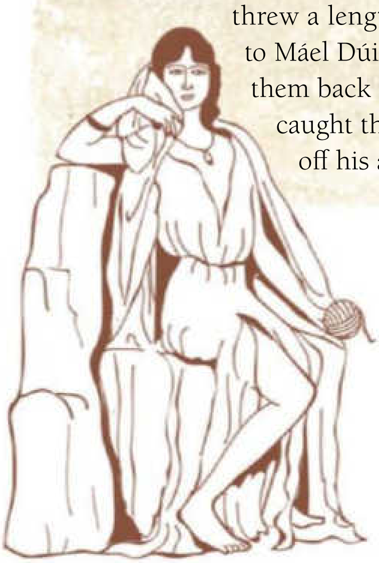
► **Queen of Tir na nÓg**
Niamh Chinn Óir was a young woman of exceptional beauty, who would ride across Ireland on horseback. She ruled a land where nobody aged or fell sick but where the years passed by like minutes.



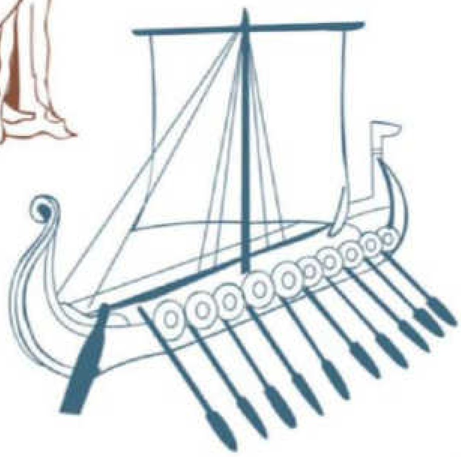
◄ **Oisín and the boulder**
Oisín saw two men struggling to raise a boulder as he passed on his horse. But when he stepped down from his mount to help them, he aged 300 years in a few moments.

THE LAND OF WOMEN

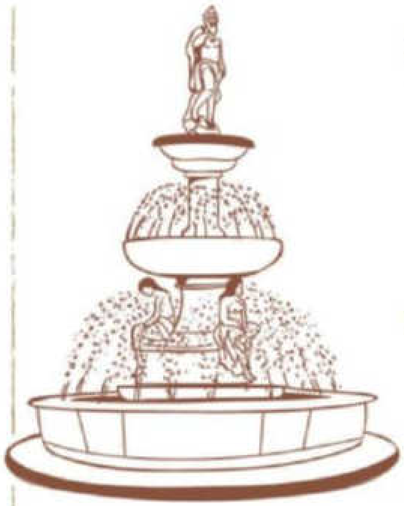
Máel Dúin was an illegitimate child. One day he learned that his father had been slain by raiders and set off to seek the killers. He and his 17 companions visited many islands, each with amazing inhabitants, including enormous birds, fighting horses, and other wonders. Finally, the travellers reached the "Land of Women", where the queen married Máel Dúin and offered her daughters as wives to his crew. After staying there for three months, the men wanted to return home. But every time they set sail, the queen threw a length of twine that stuck to Máel Dúin's hand, and she pulled them back in. Finally, another sailor caught the twine and the others cut off his arm to help them escape.



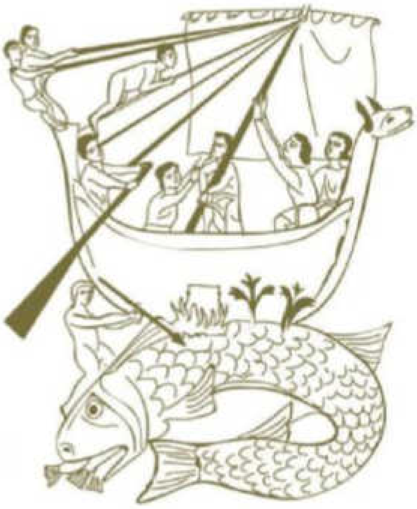
Isle of the maidens
The land that Máel Dúin and his companions found was populated only by women, all of whom were eager for the visiting men to stay with them.



Celtic ship
Máel Dúin and his crew travelled in a ship that, like Viking ships, was equipped with a sail and oars for use when there was no wind.



Fountain of knowledge
According to legend, there was a fountain in the "Land of Promise" whose waters were said to grant secret knowledge to the drinker.



Voyage of St Brendan
The Irish saint, Brendan, lived in the 6th century and travelled widely. On one voyage he supposedly landed on a whale, believing it to be an island.

THE LAND OF PROMISE

Set far across the sea, Tir Tairngire, or the "Land of Promise", was the place most sought after by explorers. It was a paradise where life was easy and where visitors could acquire magical skills. Some believed that Manannán mac Lir, a sea god and a great warrior, was the ruler of Tir Tairngire, although others thought he merely travelled there, taking with him his young son, Mongán, who stayed here for years and gained much secret knowledge. One of the explorers to reach this land was a Christian saint, Brendan, who journeyed in a boat along with 14 companions. It was one of many marvellous islands that Brendan was said to have visited in a series of travels that may have included expeditions to Iceland.

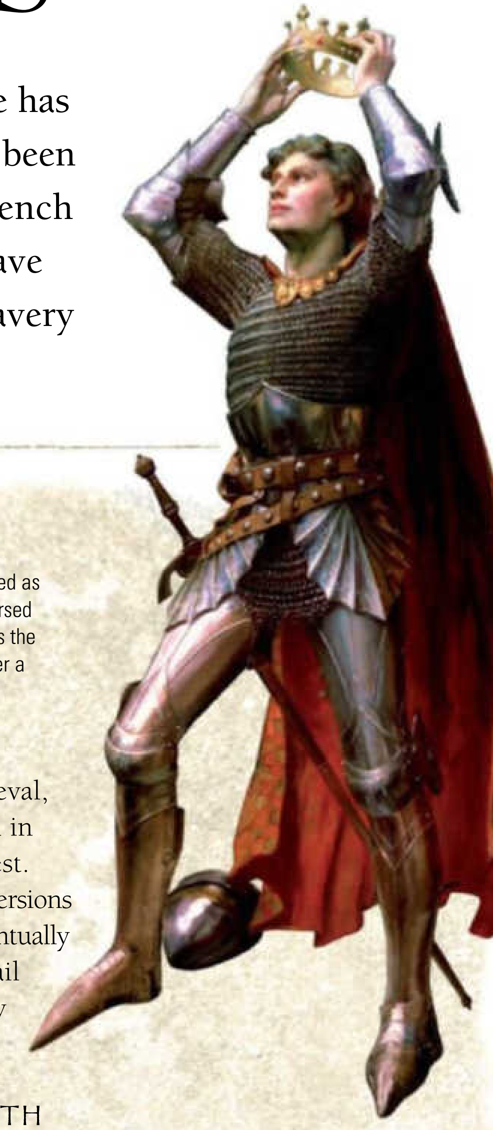
THE LAND UNDER THE WAVES

There are a number of Celtic tales about the "Land under the Waves", a city or country submerged in the sea. The most famous tale is the story of Ys, off Brittany. This was a prosperous city that was protected from the waves by a strong dyke built by a saintly king called Gradlon Meur. But Gradlon had a wicked daughter called Dahut. Different versions of the story depict her as having opened the sluice gates after either getting drunk or being persuaded by another evil character to do so. Consequently, in all versions of the myth, the sea rushed in from every side and Ys disappeared forever beneath the waves. Some believed that life went on in the strange submarine world of the vanished city.

The submerged city
According to the legend of Ys, people who travelled along the Breton coast could hear the bells of the city's churches ringing below the waves.

KING ARTHUR AND HIS KNIGHTS

The legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table has captured the imagination of writers down the ages. There have been different versions of the story told by British, German, and French authors, but all of them portray Arthur as a wise, just, and brave ruler. The tales extolled the ideals of honour, chivalry, and bravery exemplified by this perfect king and his valiant knights.



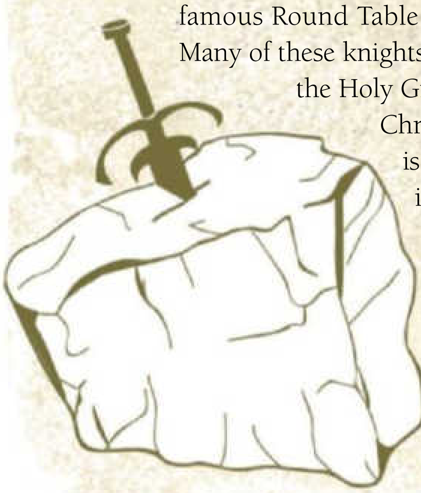
King Arthur
The mythical ruler is depicted as strong, athletic, and well-versed in the art of warfare. He was the ideal king who presided over a golden age of chivalry.

THE MYTH

Arthur was the illegitimate son of King Uther Pendragon of Britain and Queen Ygern of Cornwall. Hence he was brought up in secret, away from his parents. However, Uther gave Arthur a chance to become his heir. The king embedded a sword in a block of stone and declared that whomever pulled it out would rightfully become the future King of Britain. Many knights tried to recover the sword but failed, until one day Arthur arrived and removed it easily. Later, when the sword was damaged in a duel, Arthur was given a new sword – the mythical "Excalibur" – by the "Lady of the Lake", a figure shrouded in mystery in the Arthurian legends.

THE KING AND HIS KNIGHTS

Arthur was an honourable king who ruled wisely. He was deeply in love with the beautiful Guinevere, whom he took for his queen. He had many brave knights as his followers, and they discussed matters of state sitting together around the famous Round Table in the castle at Camelot. Many of these knights set out on a quest to find the Holy Grail, the cup used by Jesus Christ before his death, which is considered one of the most important Christian relics in history. However, only Galahad, Perceval, and Bors succeeded in completing the quest. According to some versions of the story, they eventually found the Holy Grail and took it to the city of Jerusalem.



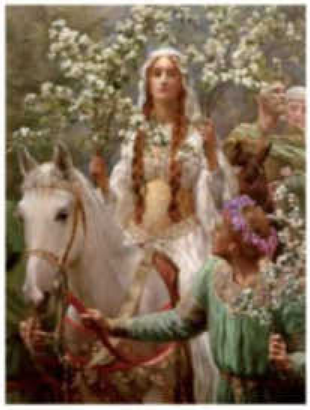
The sword in the stone
Pulling the sword out of the stone was an apparently impossible task. Only a hero could succeed, and when Arthur did so, people were convinced that he was the rightful king.

ARTHUR'S DEATH

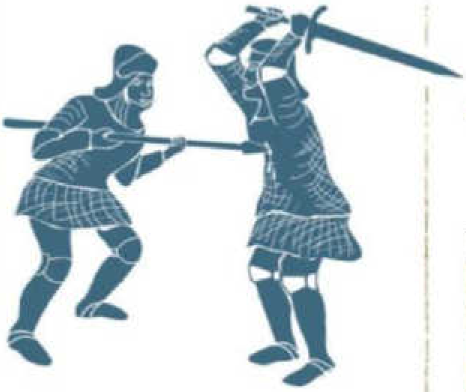
Meanwhile, problems were brewing at Camelot. One of Arthur's trusted knights, Lancelot, fell in love with Queen Guinevere, and they had a secret affair. When Arthur found out, he banished Lancelot, who was also his dearest friend. Subsequently, Arthur's son, Mordred, decided to challenge his father for control of the kingdom. Many warriors on both sides perished in the fierce battle; those left alive included King Arthur and Mordred, who continued to fight each other relentlessly. Arthur finally killed his treacherous son, but was himself gravely wounded. Knowing that he was nearing death, Arthur sailed to a place called Avalon (the "island of apples"), where he fell into a long, death-like sleep. It was believed that Arthur would return to rule once again when Britain was in dire trouble and in need of a great leader. Thus, he came to be known as the "Once and Future King".

KEY CHARACTERS

Many characters are involved in the Arthurian legends – some are forces of good, while others bring about the destruction of Arthur's court at Camelot. Besides most of the knights (*see right*), a key figure on the side of good is Merlin – a wizard, prophet, and Arthur's mentor. Flawed characters include Lancelot, a chivalrous knight with one serious moral defect – his love for Queen Guinevere. Lancelot also fails Arthur because he arrives too late to help the king in his battle with Mordred. In some versions of the story, Lancelot becomes a priest upon finding out that Guinevere has repented and become a nun.



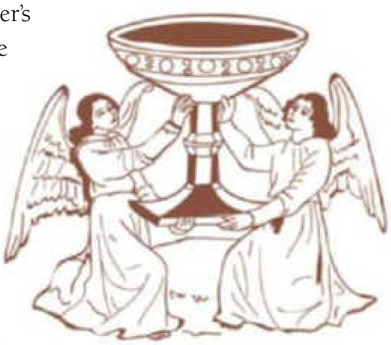
Queen Guinevere
The different versions of the story vary in the degree of blame assigned to Guinevere for betraying Arthur by having an affair with Lancelot.



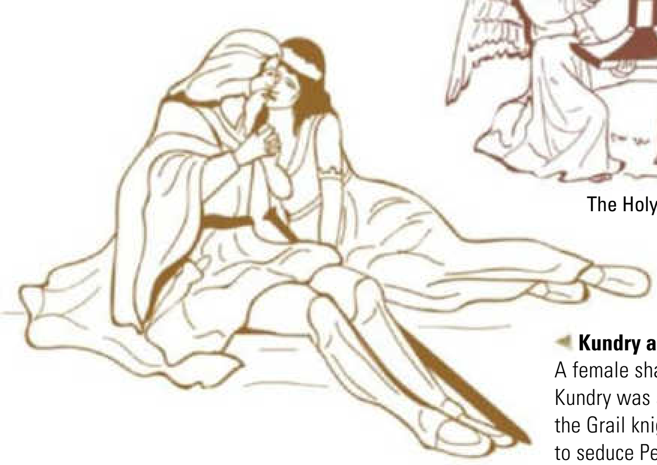
Mordred and Arthur
The battle between the two rivals, son and father, over the throne of Camelot, culminated in a single combat in which Mordred was killed and Arthur received a fatal wound.

PERCEVAL

A young man of noble birth, Perceval became a knight after proving his worth at King Arthur's court. The Grail legends portrayed him as rather naive, a "pure fool". It was this purity, however, that made him worthy of the Grail and helped him resist the seduction of Kundry, a mysterious figure sent to distract him from the Grail quest. His story inspired Richard Wagner's opera, *Parsifal*, where he heals the mortal wounds of Amfortas, the guardian of the Holy Grail.



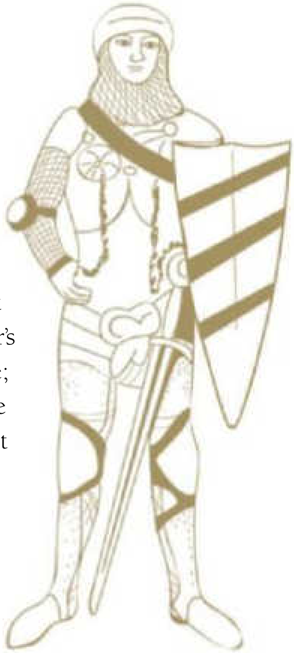
The Holy Grail



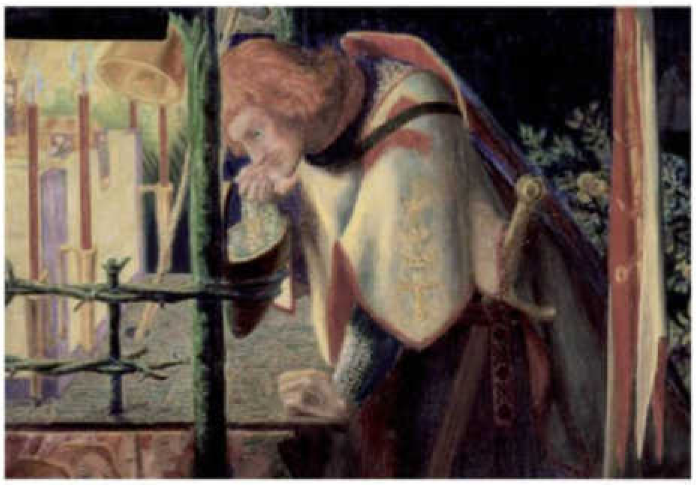
Kundry and Perceval
A female shaman-figure, Kundry was sent to corrupt the Grail knights, but failed to seduce Perceval.

THE KNIGHTS

The Knights of the Round Table were chivalrous men. They were fair in their dealings with others, courteous to women, and helpful to people in need. They were daring and killed monsters and defeated outlaws. There were many tales of their deeds, such as Galahad's quest for the Holy Grail; the adventures of Arthur's nephew, Gawain; the exploits of Pellinore; and the deeds of the naive Perceval. Some stories were about their loves, others about their involvement in political disputes.



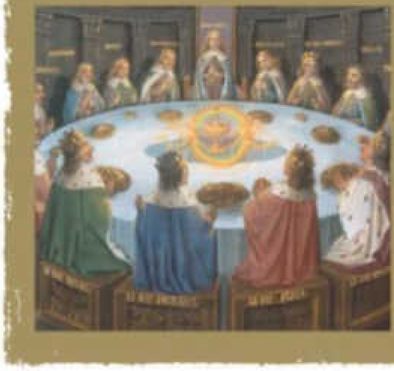
Lancelot
The dashing Lancelot was brought up by the "Lady of the Lake", who gave him a shield with three stripes that would magnify his strength in battle.



Galahad
The son of Lancelot, Galahad was celibate and pure at heart. He was truly worthy of finding the Grail, although the quest was long and weary, and he died soon afterwards.

THE ROUND TABLE

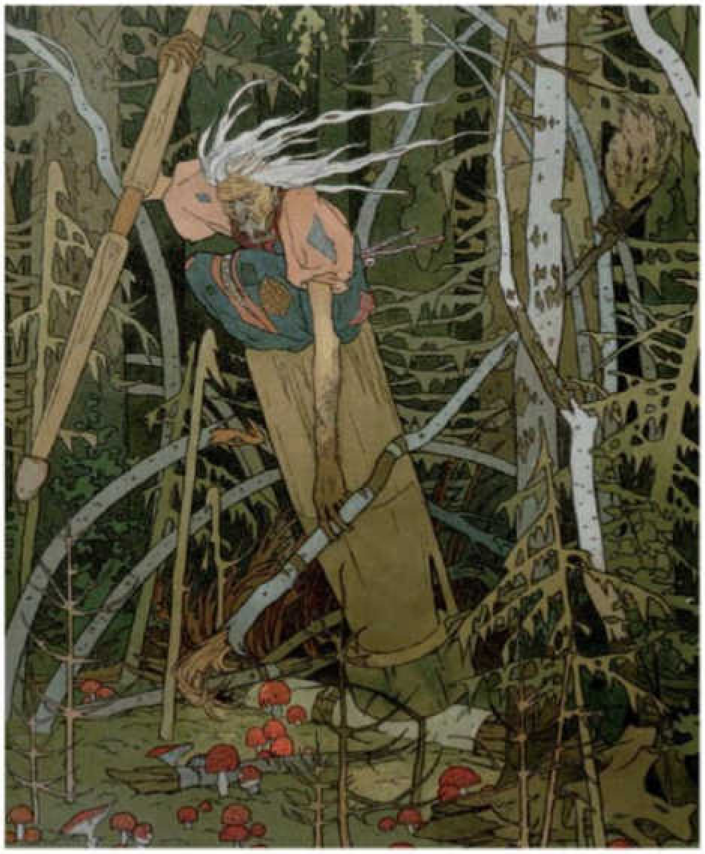
Descriptions of the circular table in Arthur's castle at Camelot vary – some said it could seat 100 or more knights – but the key principle always remained constant: every knight had equal prominence. One particular seat, known as the "Siege Perilous", or the "Seat of Danger", was traditionally left empty because it was believed that the knight to sit on it would find the Holy Grail, and die, thereby ending the days of the Round Table.



Knights at the Table

LEGENDS OF THE WITCH

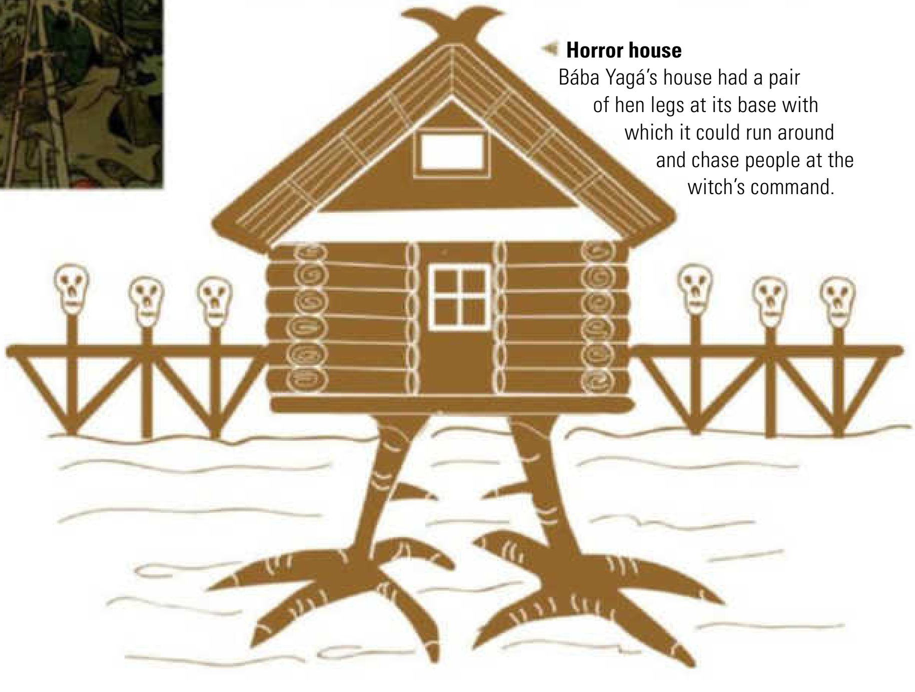
The folklore of the Slavs often reflects their ancestors' anxieties about evil, the unknown, and the dangers of the forest. There are many tales of witches, who were believed to be sinister women living in these forests, and who preyed on innocent people, or upset family relationships or the social order. Foremost among such evil characters is Bába Yagá, a witch who appears in Russian legends, and in similar tales found across Central Europe, where her name varies slightly. However, her rapacious appetite for the flesh of young children stays consistent, though many of her victims manage to outwit her.



Bába Yagá
The wicked old witch would use her mortar and pestle to travel in the forest, where she would hide among the trees, waiting to ambush unwary victims that walked past her.

BÁBA YAGÁ

The witch called Bába Yagá was depicted in stories as a wrinkled old woman sitting quietly on a wooden bench or keeping warm by her stove. When travelling, she would step into a large mortar and push herself through the sky with a pestle, starting violent storms as she flew. She specially looked out for young children, whom she liked to capture and eat. Some people believed that the witch could turn people to stone with her gaze, turning them back into flesh at her home to feed on them. Bába Yagá used the bones left over after her feedings to build a gruesome and enchanted house for herself, which terrified people for miles around. Even its fence was decorated with the skulls of the children she had killed, and she would light these skulls up like lanterns.



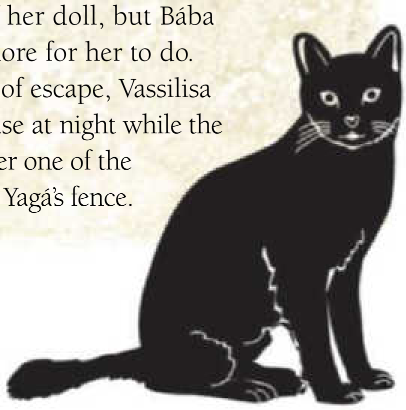
Horror house
Bába Yagá's house had a pair of hen legs at its base with which it could run around and chase people at the witch's command.

Roses for wishes
Some legends of Bába Yagá say that the witch could grant people their wishes if she were offered roses, although most stories warn that it was still risky to trust the witch.

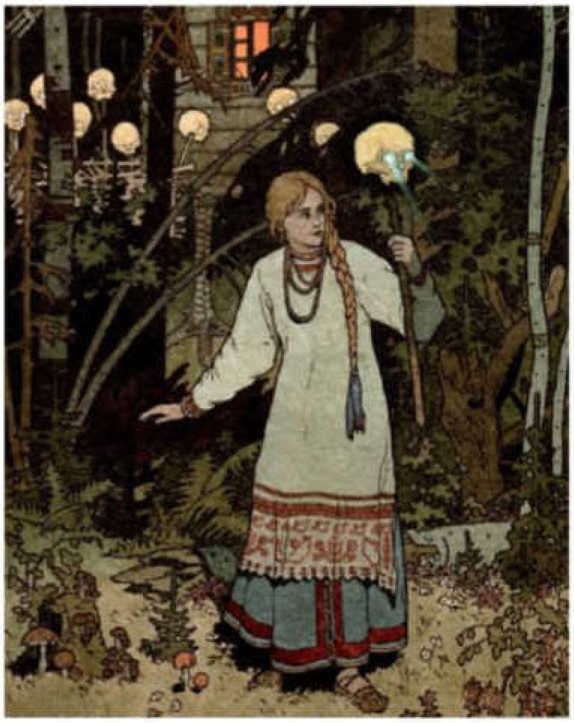
VASSILISA

Vassilisa was a young girl who lived with her elderly parents in a village. Her mother fell ill and, before dying, gave Vassilisa a magic doll, which would advise her if she offered it good food to eat. Vassilisa's father remarried, but her stepmother and stepsisters did not like Vassilisa and made her do all the hard work at home. One day, when a taper was needed to light the lamps in the house, Vassilisa's stepmother sent her to get some from Bába Yagá, who, instead of giving her some, set the girl some impossible tasks, such as picking out only peas from a mixture of peas and poppy seeds. Vassilisa was able to successfully complete all the tasks with the help of her doll, but Bába Yagá kept devising more for her to do. Seeing no other way of escape, Vassilisa stole away from the house at night while the witch slept, taking with her one of the glowing skulls from Bába Yagá's fence.

The powerless crow
Some versions of the story say that after Vassilisa's escape, the witch was turned into a crow and she lost all her powers.



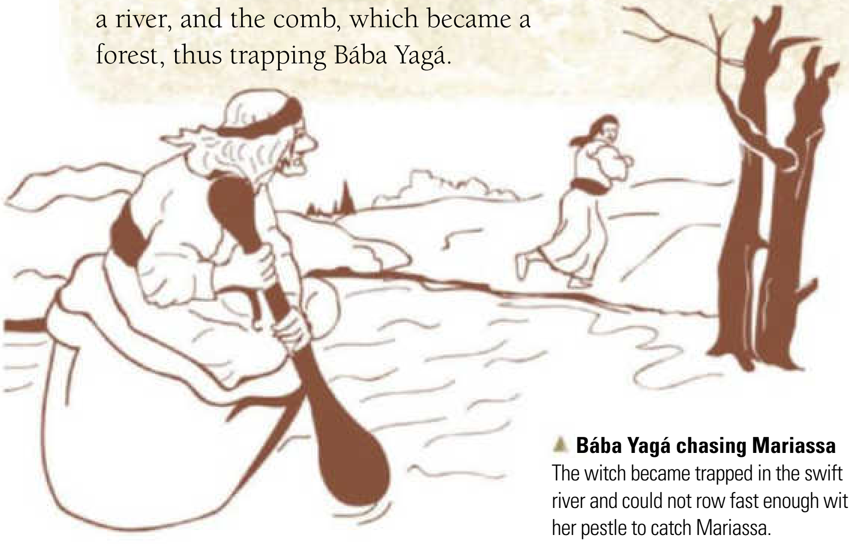
The witch's cat
Bába Yagá's black cat was ill-treated by her, so it helped Vassilisa escape her clutches.



Vassilisa and the skull
When Vassilisa returned home with the skull that she had stolen from Bába Yagá's fence, its glowing eyes shone on her stepmother and stepsisters, turning them to ashes.

MARIASSA

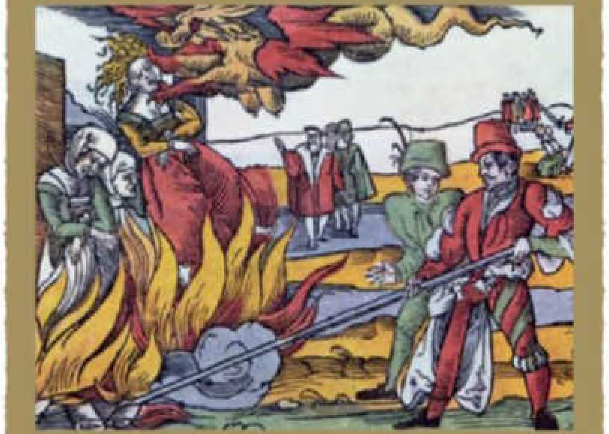
There was once a young girl called Mariassa, whose stepmother sent her to Bába Yagá to borrow a needle and thread. Luckily, the girl initially called on her aunt, who told Mariassa how to avoid the jaws of Bába Yagá's dog and how to talk to her cat. Mariassa asked the cat for a way out when the witch tried to imprison the girl, and it told her to run away with a towel and a comb. Mariassa escaped, and when she heard the witch approaching, she threw down the towel, which turned into a river, and the comb, which became a forest, thus trapping Bába Yagá.



Bába Yagá chasing Mariassa
The witch became trapped in the swift river and could not row fast enough with her pestle to catch Mariassa.

WITCH BURNING

With the arrival of Christianity in Central and Eastern Europe, witches came to be regarded as evil women who performed the Devil's work. Many women suspected of being witches were burned at the stake, most of whom had nothing to do with witchcraft at all. Making models of witches that are burned on May Day is still a popular custom in Central Europe. Such customs, associated with the many rituals that celebrate the arrival of spring, are also held in remembrance of those who died.



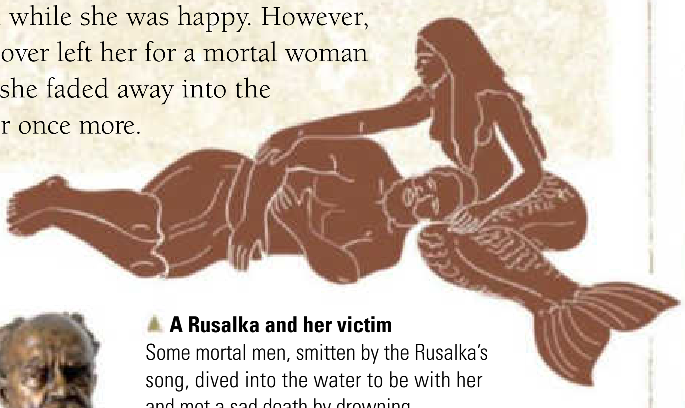
A 16th-century engraving of a witch burning

MYTHS OF WOOD AND WATER

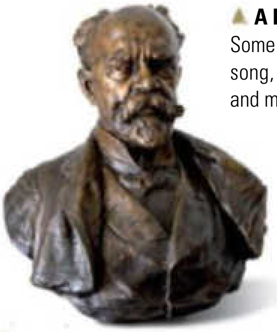
The Slavic lands are full of dense forests and misty lakes, both natural and man-made. From earliest times these places were believed to have their special spirits. Some were threatening beings that embodied the anxiety of travellers, who were fearful of getting lost in the woods or drowning while crossing a lake. Even country people, who knew the forests and lakes of their region well, were wary of these spirits.

RUSALKAS

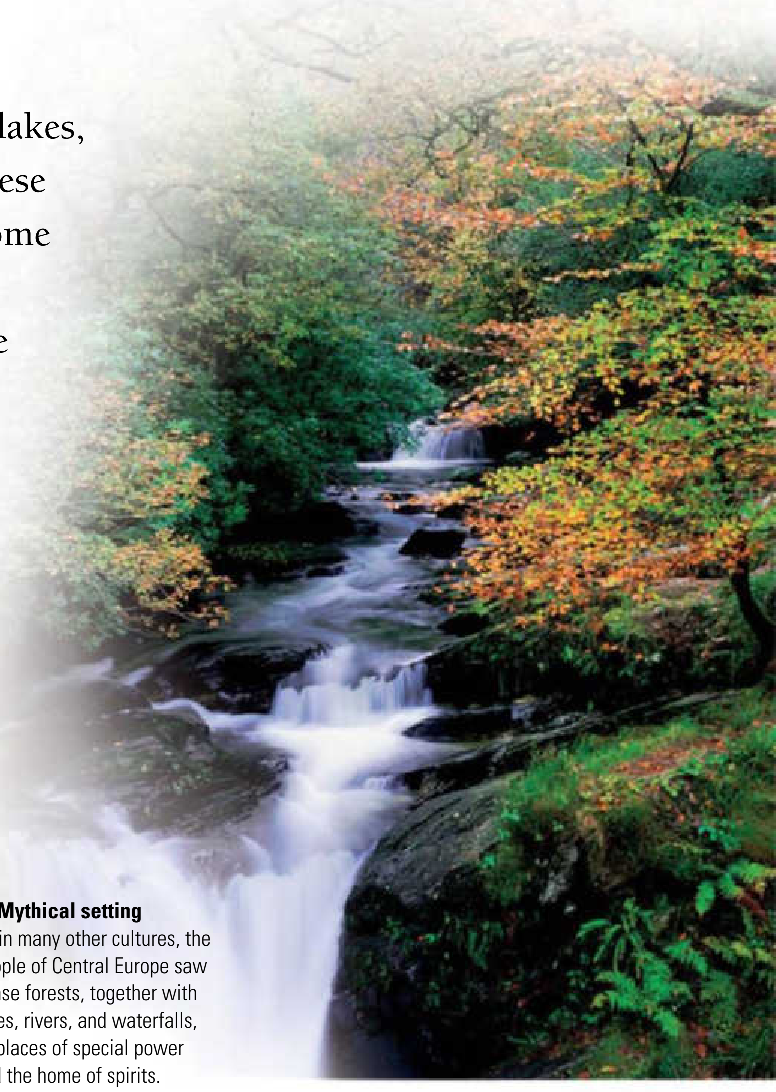
Rusalkas were alluring water nymphs known for their beautiful song. They probably originated as fertility spirits, associated with particular lakes and with the life-giving power of water. But they were later said to be the souls of children who had died at a young age, or of women who had drowned themselves. Their song lured passers-by into the water. One story told how a Rusalka left the water when she fell in love with a mortal prince. She had to lose her voice to survive in the air, but for a while she was happy. However, her lover left her for a mortal woman and she faded away into the water once more.



A Rusalka and her victim
Some mortal men, smitten by the Rusalka's song, dived into the water to be with her and met a sad death by drowning.



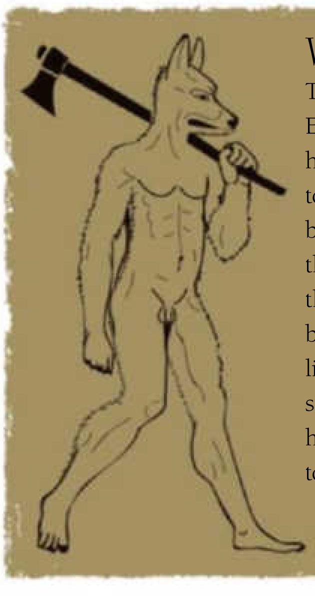
Antonín Dvořák
The Czech composer Dvořák (1841–1904) wrote a famous opera, *Rusalka*, about the nymph who left her home for a mortal love.



Mythical setting
As in many other cultures, the people of Central Europe saw dense forests, together with lakes, rivers, and waterfalls, as places of special power and the home of spirits.

WEREWOLVES

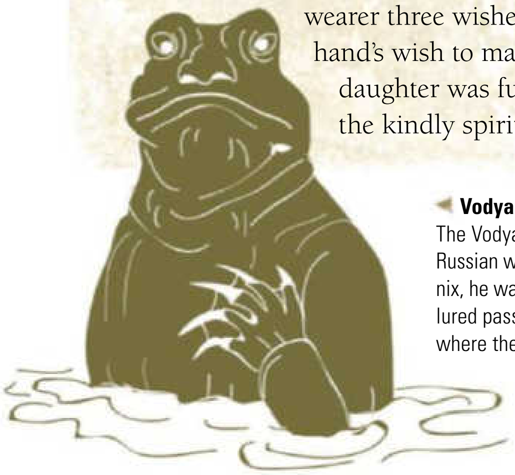
The legends of Central and Eastern Europe often feature werewolves, humans who could change shape to become wolves. Malevolent and bloodthirsty, they appeared when the moon was full and preyed on the unsuspecting. It was said that babies born with a birthmark were likely to become werewolves. Plants such as rye and mistletoe, and a herb called wolfsbane, were believed to ward off werewolf attacks.



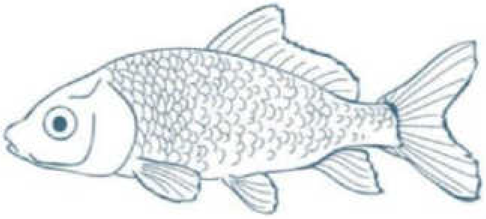
The wolf man

WATER SPIRITS

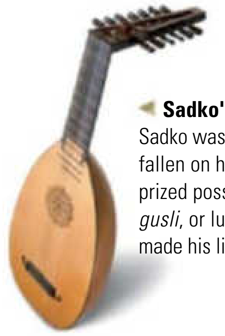
Like the Rusalkas, water spirits and nixes lived in lakes and, especially, mill ponds. A legend from southeastern Europe tells of a nix who helped a mortal. There was a young mill-hand who loved the miller's daughter. But the miller wanted his daughter to marry a rich man from the local castle. One day, the two rivals fought and the mill-hand was pushed into the mill pond, where he was found by a nix. The mill-hand entertained the nix on his violin. The two got on so well that when the mill-hand was about to leave the water, the friendly nix gave him a magical ring, which would grant the wearer three wishes. So the mill-hand's wish to marry the miller's daughter was fulfilled, thanks to the kindly spirit of the pond.



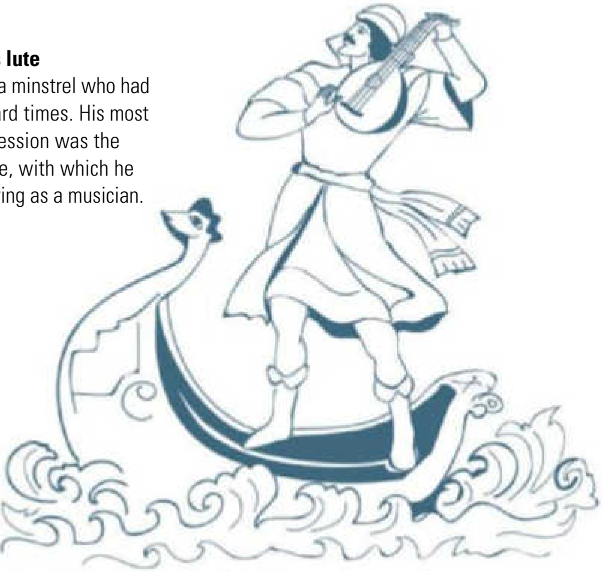
Vodyanoi
The Vodyanoi was the most familiar Russian water spirit. Unlike the kindly nix, he was a dangerous creature who lured passers-by into his watery lair, where they subsequently drowned.



Carp
Water spirits often sorted the fish in the pond, sending eels on their regular migrations. Fishermen in search of carp placed a pinch of tobacco in the water to please the spirits.



Sadko's lute
Sadko was a minstrel who had fallen on hard times. His most prized possession was the *gusli*, or lute, with which he made his living as a musician.



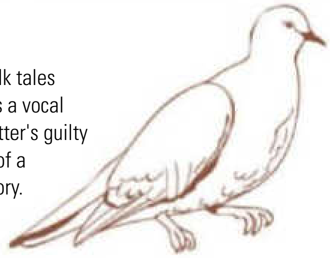
The minstrel Sadko
The musical theme of Sadko's story made it attractive to composers. The Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908) wrote an opera based on the tale.

SADKO

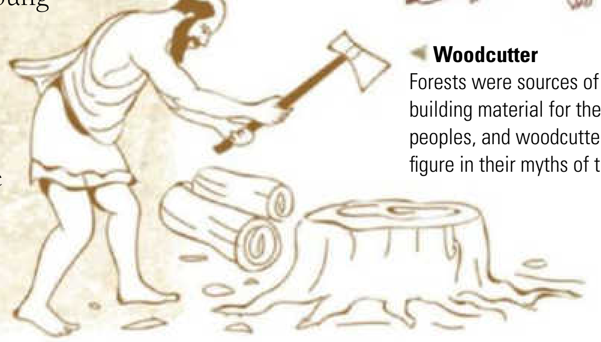
A popular Slavic myth tells of the minstrel Sadko who was invited by a water spirit to play in his palace. The spirits danced to Sadko's music till he grew tired and could play no more. A wise water spirit advised Sadko to stop the dance by breaking the strings of his lute. If he did this, the sea god would offer him a wife in return for his playing – but he must choose the last of the women offered to him, and even then he must never touch her. Sadko did as he was told, choosing the last woman the sea god offered, and lying apart from her. But at night, his right foot accidentally touched her. To his amazement, Sadko woke up alone on the river bank, to find he was lame in his right foot.

THE WOOD DOVE

The magic of both woods and water come together in the Slavic legend of the wood dove. There was once an old woodcutter who was poisoned by his wicked wife because she wanted to marry a handsome young man with whom she was in love. Soon after his death, the woman married her lover and they had a lavish wedding feast. At first they lived together happily. Meanwhile, grass grew over the woodcutter's grave and a young oak tree took root there. Whenever the woman passed the grave, a wood dove perched in the tree cooed at her accusingly. Each time she heard the wood dove, she felt it was the voice of her murdered husband. Deeply tormented, she drowned herself in the river.



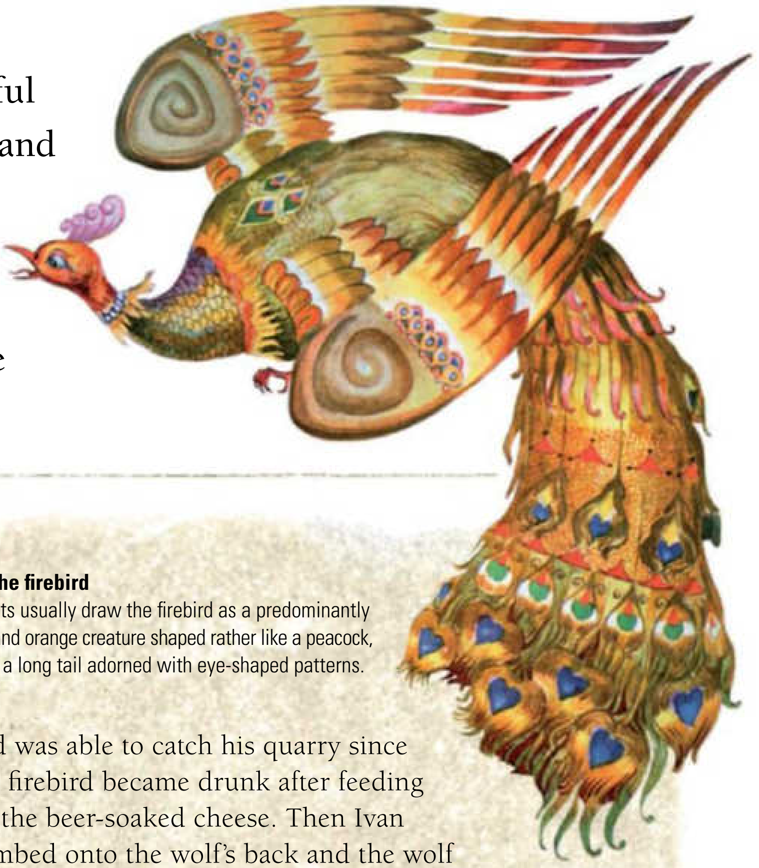
Voice of the dove
Birds often speak in folk tales because their song has a vocal quality. To the woodcutter's guilty wife, even the cooing of a dove sounded accusatory.



Woodcutter
Forests were sources of fuel and building material for the Slavic peoples, and woodcutters often figure in their myths of the forest.

THE FIREBIRD

Slavic mythology describes the firebird as a beautiful creature with a long tail and stunning red, yellow, and orange feathers that glow as if on fire. The firebird inspires wonder in all who see it, causing them to desire it. But it is not easy to capture, and those who do manage to catch it often have to face a multitude of problems that come in its wake.



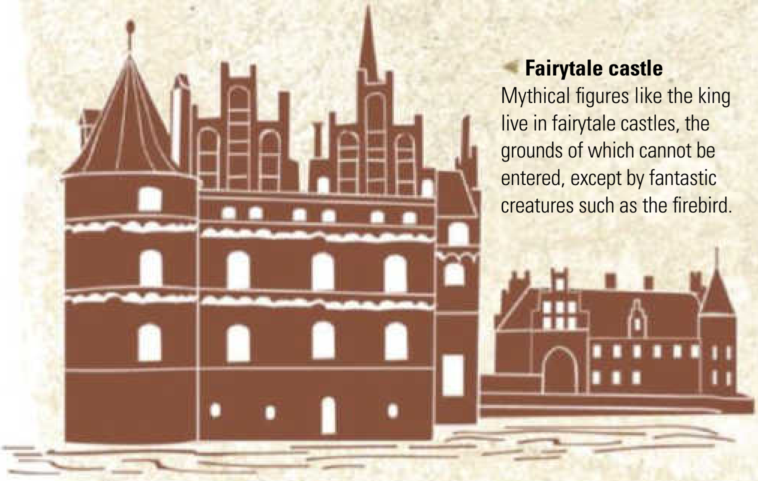
The firebird
Artists usually draw the firebird as a predominantly red and orange creature shaped rather like a peacock, with a long tail adorned with eye-shaped patterns.

THE MYTH

There was once a king who owned a wonderful apple orchard that he was especially proud of, because one of its trees bore golden apples. But each night, he found that some of the golden apples would disappear. So the king commanded Ivan, a stable boy, to guard the tree at night. The first night that Ivan stood guard in the orchard, a firebird came and stole some apples. Ivan attempted to grab the bird, but the creature was so swift that he could only catch hold of a single feather as it flew away. Ivan delivered the feather to the king who marvelled at it and dispatched Ivan to find and capture the firebird.

CATCHING THE FIREBIRD

After he had travelled a few miles on his quest for the firebird, Ivan came across a grey wolf, who told him how to catch the bird. Ivan would have to soak some cheese in beer and scatter the food on the ground to tempt the firebird. Ivan followed the wolf's instructions and was able to catch his quarry since the firebird became drunk after feeding on the beer-soaked cheese. Then Ivan climbed onto the wolf's back and the wolf took him to the king's palace. The king was very pleased, and locked the firebird in a specially-made golden cage.



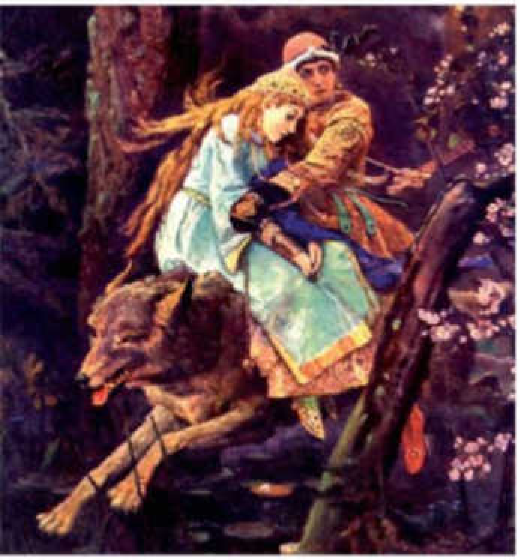
Fairytale castle
Mythical figures like the king live in fairytale castles, the grounds of which cannot be entered, except by fantastic creatures such as the firebird.

IVAN AND YELENA

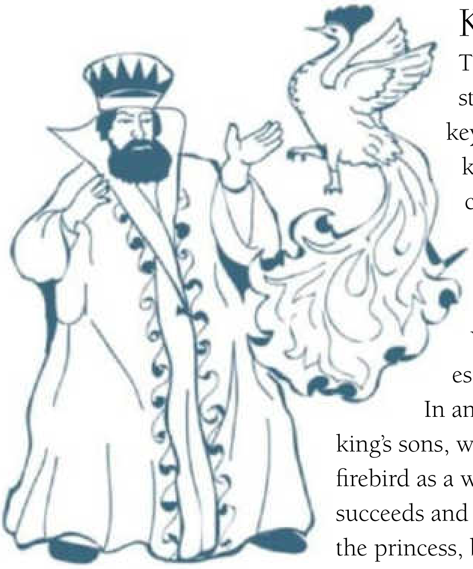
The king then sent Ivan on another errand – to fetch a beautiful princess named Yelena, who lived far away across the ocean, and who the king wanted to marry. The grey wolf helped Ivan yet again, taking him to Yelena, and carrying both Ivan and the princess on the return journey.

During their travels, Ivan and Yelena fell in love. But they were faced with a dilemma since the king was waiting to marry Yelena. Once more, the wolf had a plan to aid Ivan. When they reached the palace, the wolf revealed itself to be a shape-changer and transformed into a very beautiful princess, whom Ivan presented to the king. The king proposed marriage, and when the "wolf-princess" accepted, took her straight to church. But as the king was about to kiss his bride, she turned back into the wolf, and the king died instantly of shock.

After the king's death, Ivan became ruler in his place, and married his beloved Yelena. He was very grateful to the firebird, which was the catalyst for the adventures that had culminated in his marriage and coronation. So King Ivan set the creature free, turning a blind eye to the golden apples that would frequently go missing.



Ivan and Yelena
The story of the young lovers travelling swiftly through the night on the back of the grey wolf has long been a popular subject for artists.



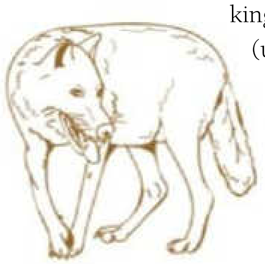
The greedy king
The king wanted to keep the firebird because it was said to bring happiness to the owner, although this turned out not to be true for him.

KEY CHARACTERS

There are several versions of the firebird story, but they usually contain the same key characters: the firebird, Ivan, the king, the grey wolf, and Yelena. A common theme is that Yelena's hand has been promised to the king against her wishes, and so Ivan and the wolf kidnap her. In some stories, Yelena's love for Ivan enables her to escape from an unwelcome marriage. In another version, Ivan is one of the king's sons, who has been tasked with catching the firebird as a way of becoming the king's heir. Ivan succeeds and his brothers kill him when he wins the princess, but the wolf's magic revives him.

THE SUPERNATURAL WORLD

In this legend, the world of animals and plants is full of supernatural powers, which have a major influence on the way events turn out. Foremost is the firebird itself, which lets pearls fall from its beak and has feathers that glow like flames. The apples are also said to be special – they bring youth and strength to those who eat them, so by stealing the apples, the bird is symbolically stealing the king's power. Finally, the wolf is not sinister (unlike in other tales), and uses its shape-changing ability to help Ivan.



The magical wolf
The wolf was a complex symbol, with links to both the dead and the world of evil, as well as to good and the overcoming of difficulties.

Apples of eternal youth
The apple tree bore golden apples, which signified not only strength and youth, but also danger and folly.

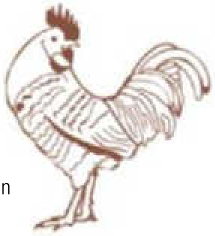
STRAVINSKY

The composer Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) was one of the most influential musicians of the 20th century. Starting with writing music for ballets on traditional Slavic themes, he became famous for colourful orchestration and strong rhythms, developing his style in ways that changed the course of music. His ballet *The Firebird* (1910) was written for the Paris-based company, the Ballets Russes, and brought the traditional Slavic legend before a global audience.

A modern rendition of *The Firebird*

SLAVIC ANIMAL MYTHS

The firebird is one of several mythical creatures in Slavic mythology that have miraculous abilities or that reflect either the dangers of the countryside or the mysterious power of the natural world. Traditional Slavic tales include many locally familiar birds and animals that take on specific characteristics in folklore: proverbially crafty foxes, swift horses, shape-changing wolves, and a golden cockerel that crows to warn a king of invasion.



The loyal cockerel
The golden cockerel that warned a king about the arrival of his enemies became the centrepiece of an opera by the Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908).

The unwitting bear
Sometimes slow and easy to deceive, but always strong, bears were once common throughout Europe and appear occasionally in Slavic legends.

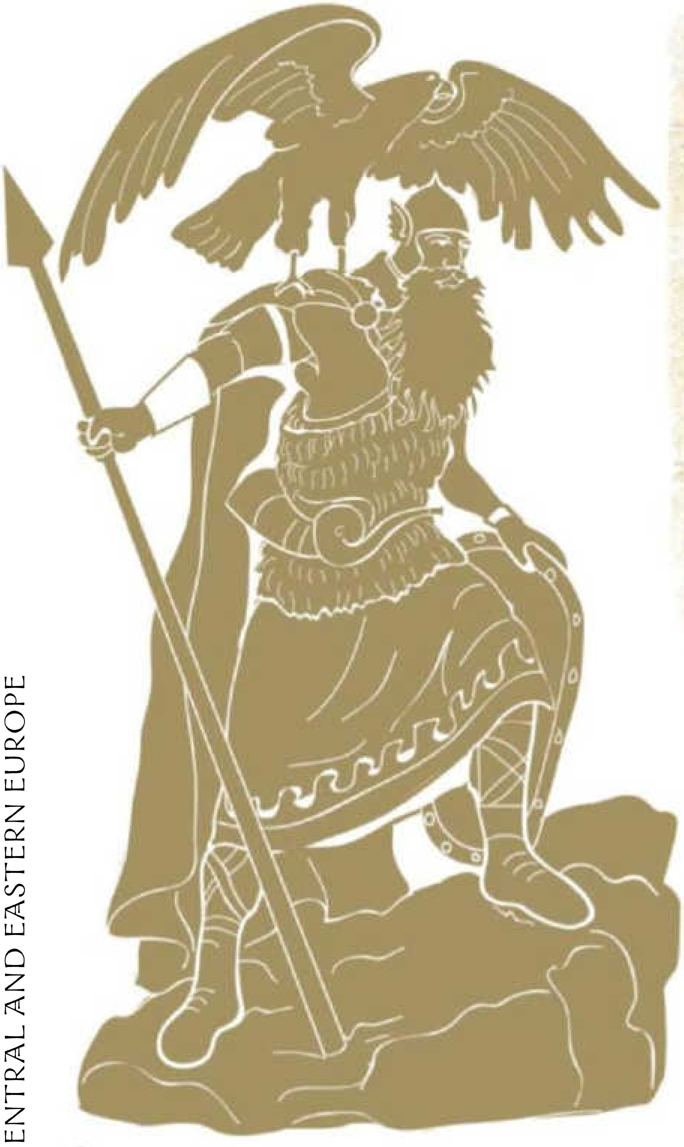
> COCKEREL FROM
> THE TOP OF SPIRE,
> WATCHES ROUND
> FOR THE FIRE.
> IS THE DANGER
> SEEN BY CHANCE,
> FAITHFUL SENTRY
> WAKES AT ONCE.
>
> Alexander Pushkin, *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel*, 1834

SLAVIC GODS OF POWER

The ancient Slavs, who lived in and around Russia, had numerous deities who ruled with great power over the Earth. Their control extended all the way from the sky, where the thunder god Perun held sway, to deep down into the Earth, the domain of Mati Syra Zemlya. The Slavs worshipped these gods by giving them offerings and assigning special days to them, occasions that combined holiday with devotion. Although their myths were orally transmitted, many of these powerful stories survived the coming of Christianity.

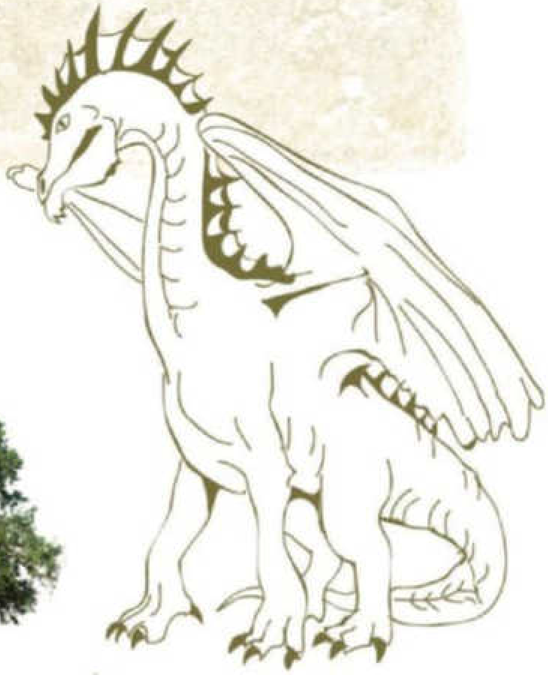
PERUN

Perun was the god of thunder and lightning. Although he was primarily a war god and his power was terrifying, he also represented the forces of good. When the sun was threatened by storm clouds that concealed it in their shadows, Perun smashed them with his thunderbolt, allowing the sun to reappear and ensuring that life on Earth could continue. The Slavs believed that humanity was constantly threatened by Veles, the god of the Underworld, who was always stealing cattle, kidnapping people, or otherwise causing mischief. At such times, Perun would strike him with his thunderbolt, sending the evil god hurrying back to his refuge. When Christian missionaries came to the Slavic regions, some of the attributes of Perun were transferred to the prophet called Ilyal, or Elijah.



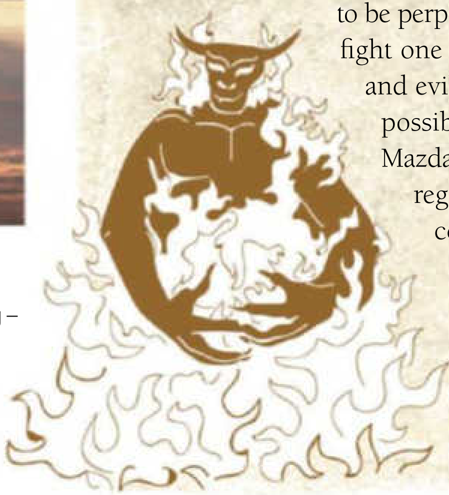
▲ **The sky god**
In addition to his weapons and his eagle, Perun was associated with many other attributes. Among the most important of these were the stone and metal that Slavic people used to make weapons.

▲ **The world tree**
In Slavic mythology, the world was represented as a vast oak, with the Underworld in its roots. Perun was symbolized by an eagle that sat in the uppermost branches of the tree.



▲ **Veles the dragon**
The Slavs imagined Veles, the god of the Underworld, as a dragon or serpent, who spent much of his time coiled among the roots of the sacred oak tree.

The god of light
The ancient Slavs closely associated the life-giving light and warmth of the sun with the benevolent god, Byelobog – especially after enduring a long, cold, dark night.



The god of darkness
As the god of darkness, Chernobog was most powerful during the "waning" phase of the year, when the nights are longer and the days become shorter.

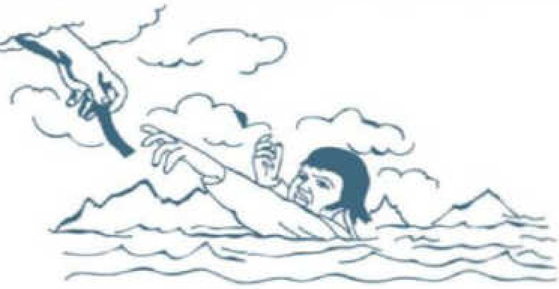
BYELOBOG AND CHERNOBOG

A benevolent god, Byelobog, and a wicked god, Chernobog, are two of the most ancient deities of Slavic mythology, and some creation stories describe how the pair created the universe together. But the two fell out and were said to be perpetually at war, appearing at regular intervals to fight one another. Because this conflict between good and evil was eternal, they were seen as similar to, and possibly derived from, the Persian deities Ahura Mazda and Ahriman. Byelobog was held in special regard because he was one of the most prominent companions of the sun god Dazhbog. People said that he was also a god of sunshine and warmth, and that if worshipped, he would protect their wheat and ensure a good harvest. Sometimes he was depicted as a kindly, white-bearded old man, and sometimes as a powerful light.

MATI SYRA ZEMLYA

The Slavic Earth goddess was called Mati Syra Zemlya (Damp Mother Earth). Normally, she was not given a specific form, but her spirit was said to be embodied in the fertile earth beneath the feet of her devotees. Even though she usually lacked a shape, she was seen as vibrantly alive and, therefore, helped everything in the soil to come to life. On certain occasions when she did take human form, she was said to appear as a woman with dark, earth-coloured skin, wearing traditional clothes, who would visit people's houses and bless them. On the holy days on which she appeared (notably 1 May and 24 June), no one was allowed to plough the soil. People worshipped her by digging a hole in the ground and putting in offerings of bread and wine.

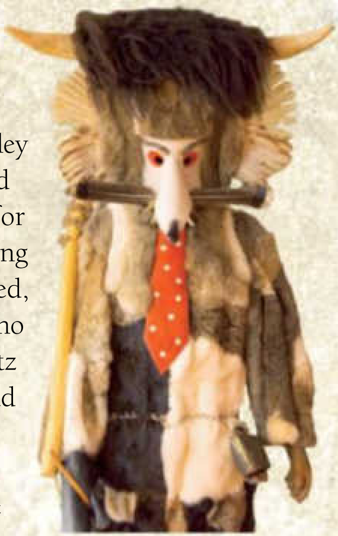
Ears of wheat
In addition to representing the fertility of the soil, Mati Syra Zemlya was also said to be present in the crops that grew on the ground, especially in the ripe ears of wheat.



The rescue of Kranyatz
When the flood waters continued to rise, Kurent offered Kranyatz his walking stick, actually a vine, and pulled him out of danger.

KURENT

Kurent was the Slavic god of wine. A popular myth tells how the first humans enjoyed an easy life in a valley irrigated by seven rivers that flowed from an egg. They became greedy for more water and broke the egg, causing a great flood. All the people drowned, except for Kranyatz, a watchman, who was saved by Kurent. Later, Kranyatz argued with the god over who should rule the Earth, and after various trials, emerged as the winner. But he got carried away and climbed the mountain where the gods lived. He ate some meat that belonged to them, and got drunk from the wine given to him by Kurent. The gods kicked him down the mountain and he lost his power.



Kurent mask
In Slovenia, sheepskin masks depicting Kurent are worn at the Kurentovanje carnival that is held to celebrate the arrival of spring.

WEST AND CENTRAL ASIA

For hundreds of years, the Bible was the main source of our knowledge of ancient Babylon, Ashur, and other great cities of the Middle East. The Old Testament uncompromisingly portrayed all these cities as being dominated by ruthless rulers whose overriding ambitions were to conquer their neighbours and crush all those who did not follow their religion. And that religion, involving belief in a great many deities, was in stark contrast to the Jewish belief in one God. It is perhaps unsurprising that the Bible took a dim view of these societies.

In the 19th century, our understanding of the ancient cultures of West Asia deepened. Archaeologists began to explore the mud-brick remains of cities such as Babylon, Ashur, Ur, and Uruk in earnest. They also got to grips with deciphering the writing on countless clay tablets that were discovered at these sites. What emerged was a picture of a much more sophisticated society than had previously been imagined, one that had made great advances in mathematics, astrology, medicine, and the law. In addition, archaeologists found out much more about the beliefs of these cities' inhabitants and the stories they told one another. A much fuller, rounder impression of the early culture of ancient Iraq and its neighbours began to emerge.

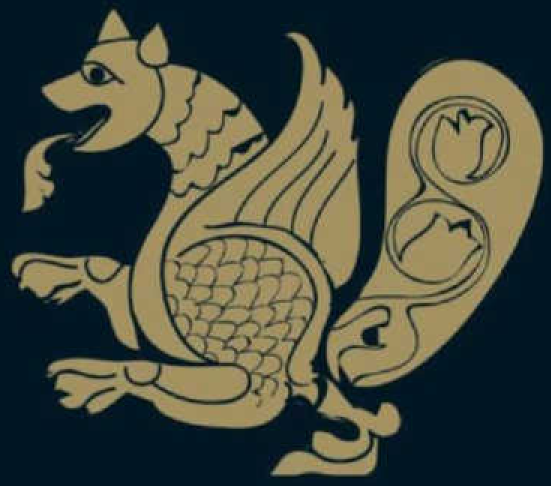
In some ways, the myths that were revealed confirmed the Biblical prejudices. Some stories were extremely bloodthirsty, and some involved practices – such as temple prostitution – that offended most outsiders. But the myths also included many gripping tales – of the creation, of visits to the Underworld, and of the deeds of great heroes such as Gilgamesh, the mythical king who strove for immortality.

A number of these exciting stories, including accounts of the creation and of wars between the gods, are strikingly similar to stories in other cultures. Perhaps the closest parallel of all is in

> WHATEVER A MAN MAY DO, HE IS BUT A REED IN THE WIND.
>
> Mesopotamian proverb

the story of the great flood, a theme that occurs in many mythologies all around the world. The West Asian flood story concerns a patriarchal figure called Utnapishtim who builds a boat to escape a deluge unleashed by a wrathful god. It is remarkably similar to the story of Noah and the Ark in the Old Testament – Utnapishtim even takes animals of each species into his "ark" to ensure their survival. Such powerful stories, most of them written in the Babylonian, or Akkadian, language, are now as well known as the ancient cultures that produced them. Iraq's archaeological sites have recently become highly vulnerable to war damage, so these stories may become the culture's most enduring remains. But the stories from great cities such as Ur, Uruk, Ashur, and Babylon are not the only mythical traditions of West and Central Asia. At opposite ends of this extensive region, the Hittites of ancient Turkey and the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula added their own rich stores of myths. So too did the ancient Persians, whose prophet Zoroaster described a vision of the cosmos dominated by a constant struggle between the Wise Lord, Ahura Mazda, and his wicked opponent, Ahriman. When the Mongols travelled west from their homelands, they, too, brought with them yet more tales of great heroism and extraordinary adventure.

This rich mix of cultures and their deities, from the weather gods of the Hittites to the Wise Lord of the Persians, makes the region of West and Central Asia one of the most mythologically fascinating of all. There is so much variety in these very different ancient mythologies that there is always something new and exciting for the reader to discover.



THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

The story of Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk, is the oldest extended narrative to have come down from the ancient world. It survives in the form of an epic poem written on clay tablets in the 7th century BCE in Assyria, although the story dates back to the 3rd millennium BCE. Its themes of heroism, friendship, and the quest for immortality, together with the poem's exotic cast of characters, have proved fascinating for generations of readers.

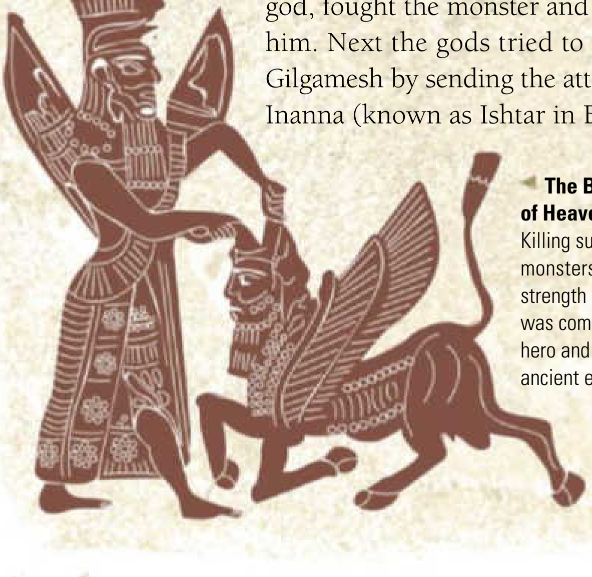
Gilgamesh
The main characteristics of Gilgamesh were his superhuman strength and great willpower – traits symbolized in this statue by the commanding way in which he holds the lion.

THE MYTH

Gilgamesh was a ruthless and cruel ruler of Uruk. He forced the men to be his slaves and the women to be his mistresses. Helpless against the mighty Gilgamesh, the people prayed to the gods for help and they responded by sending a wild man named Enkidu to fight Gilgamesh and subdue him. Gilgamesh attempted to tame Enkidu by sending a temple prostitute to seduce him. The woman took Enkidu to Uruk to civilize him, but when they arrived at a wedding in the city, Enkidu saw Gilgamesh demanding to sleep with the bride, and challenged him to a fight. They were both strong and evenly matched, and realized after a long struggle that there could be no winner. Thus, they embraced and became friends.

THE TWO TYRANTS

Now there were two tyrants terrorizing the people of Uruk. This time the gods sent a creature called Humbaba, who was a fire-breathing monster. But Gilgamesh and Enkidu, who were supported by Shamash, the sun god, fought the monster and killed him. Next the gods tried to trick Gilgamesh by sending the attractive Inanna (known as Ishtar in Babylon) to seduce him, but he rejected her. Normally irresistible, she resented this rebuff and complained to the gods, who responded by sending another monster, the Bull of Heaven. But even this creature was killed by Enkidu and Gilgamesh. Now the gods decided that one of them must pay for killing Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. They decreed that Enkidu would die.



The Bull of Heaven
Killing supernatural monsters of great strength like the bull was common for the hero and antihero in ancient epic poetry.

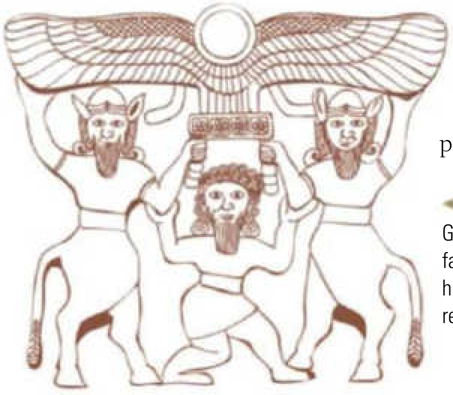
THE SEARCH FOR IMMORTALITY

Enkidu's death forced Gilgamesh to consider his own mortality. He knew of a man named Utnapishtim who was the sole survivor of a great flood and had been granted immortality. So Gilgamesh visited Utnapishtim to find a way of attaining immortality. Utnapishtim told him that the gods had caused the flood because they were angry at the sins of humans. But Enki (Ea in Babylonian myth), the water god, had appeared in a dream to Utnapishtim and instructed him to build a boat.

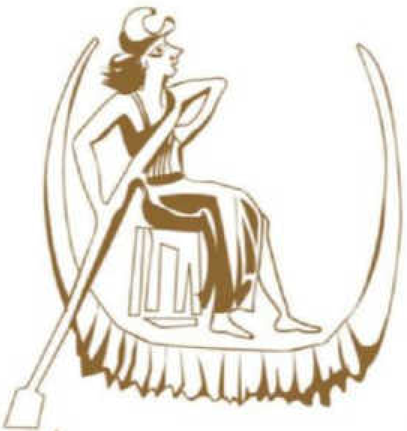
Utnapishtim advised Gilgamesh to accept his fate as a mortal, but also told him of a plant growing at the bottom of a lake in the Underworld that gave everlasting youth to whomever ate from it. Gilgamesh went to the Underworld and found the plant, but on his way back, a snake stole the plant. Realizing the futility of his quest, Gilgamesh accepted his fate.

KEY CHARACTERS

Although the epic is set in a real place, a city-state called Uruk in the Mesopotamian region, most of its major characters are linked with the supernatural world. The creatures sent to challenge Gilgamesh are gigantic and terrifying because they come from heaven – the wild man Enkidu is created by Ninhursag, the goddess of the Earth, while the Bull of Heaven is sent by Anu, the god of the sky. Gilgamesh himself straddles both worlds. His parents are Ninsun, the goddess of the sky, and Ligulbanda, a semi-divine figure; his mixed parentage is why he is described as part-god and part-human.



The coming of Enkidu
Gilgamesh had a dream about a star falling from heaven, which he and his friends could not lift. This star represented the coming of Enkidu.

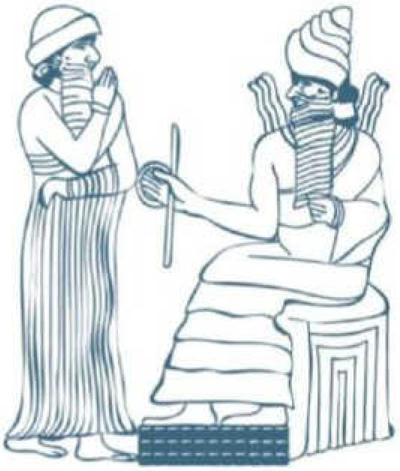


Utnapishtim
An old man by the time Gilgamesh met him, Utnapishtim told the king how he had gathered the animals of the world in his boat to save them from the flood.

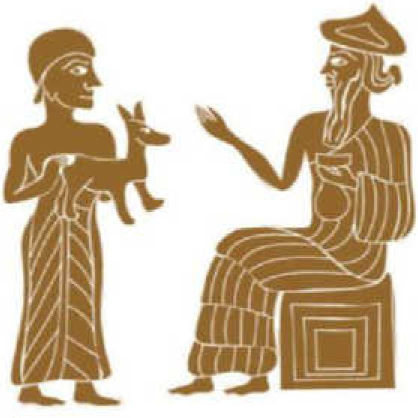
Humbaba
This forest-dwelling monster was much feared because of the deadly fire he breathed. Even Enkidu was initially reluctant to fight the beast.

DEITIES

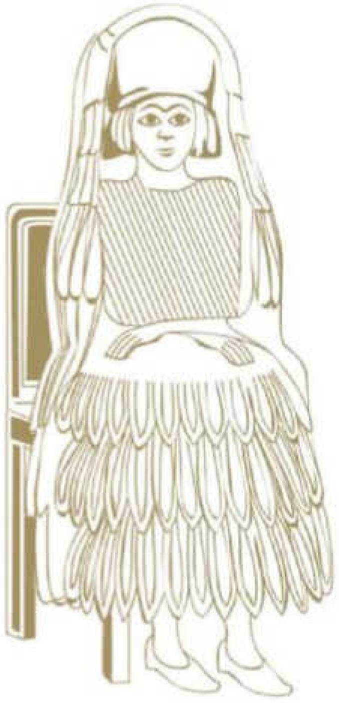
The gods and goddesses play a major role in the epic, talking to the earthbound humans and acting directly in the decisive moments of the story. They also influence events in a subtler manner by sending dreams that predict the future – the killing of Humbaba and the death of Enkidu were both foreseen in dreams. Although they are extremely powerful, the deities are fallible – their schemes to defeat Gilgamesh with monsters do not work, and Inanna's plan to seduce Gilgamesh is also a failure.



Shamash
Seen here dictating laws to a king, Shamash, the god of the sun and war, aided Gilgamesh in killing Humbaba.



Enlil
The wind god Enlil (*right*) was widely worshipped. He ordered Enkidu's death after the latter had killed Humbaba, the protector of the forest.



Inanna
The very beautiful Inanna was the goddess of sexuality. She was irresistible to most men, but Gilgamesh spurned her advances, infuriating her in the process.

Uruk
The poem mentions the mud-brick temples and city walls of Uruk, the ruins of which survive near the River Euphrates in West Asia. Some of these date from the 4th millennium BCE.

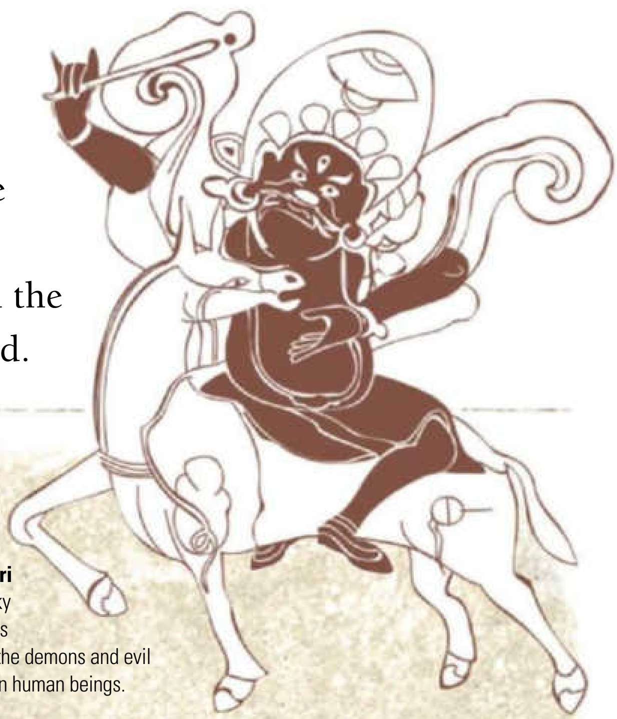
Clay tablets
Scholars have had to piece together fragments of Akkadian tablets in order to reconstruct epics like *Gilgamesh*.

VERSIONS OF THE MYTH

Several ancient texts tell stories about Gilgamesh, who was probably a real king who later gained mythical status. Most such texts are fragments that together tell Gilgamesh's story – one talks about the Bull of Heaven, another describes Enkidu's journey to the Underworld. At some point, these texts were recorded in Akkadian, a Semitic language that was widely used in Mesopotamia from the 3rd to the 1st millennium BCE. The best surviving copy of the epic – still fragmentary but more complete than the others – was preserved in the library of the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal II (668–627 BCE), at Nineveh.

THE GREAT SKY GOD

The ancient Mongol and Turkic people were animists who believed in many spirits (*tengri*) that inhabited the natural world. Supreme among these spirits was a sky god called Mongke Tengri (or just Tengri), who was the creator of humanity and the world, and who protected humans from malevolent demons. Tengri also controlled the different elements and influenced the fertility of the land.



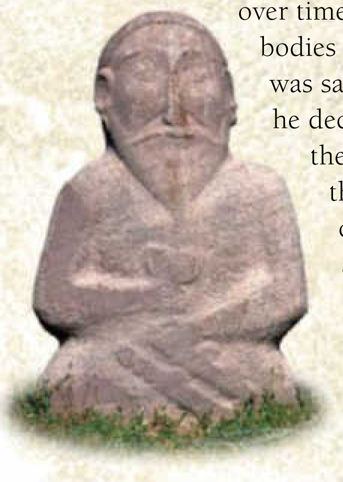
Mongke Tengri
Tengri is a fierce sky god, and wields his weaponry to fight the demons and evil spirits that threaten human beings.

THE MYTH

The Mongol account of the Earth's creation involves the high-ranking *tengri* Qormusta, and Sakyamuni – the Buddha – who is also a member of the Mongol pantheon of gods. Qormusta gave Sakyamuni a handful of yellow earth that was composed of precious stones. Sakyamuni threw it into the eternal ocean, causing it to begin to coalesce into a vast continent. At this point, a tortoise emerged from the depths of the ocean and stole the Earth. Sakyamuni realized that only the death of the tortoise would free the Earth and let the ground form. As a monk and a lover of peace, he was hesitant about killing the tortoise, but the *tengri* assured him that it was the right thing to do, because many lives would eventually flourish on the Earth after the loss of one. Thus, Sakyamuni slew the tortoise and subsequently the world was formed.

THE FIRST HUMANS

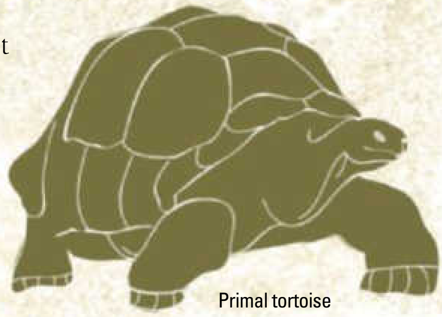
When the Earth had taken shape, only animals lived on it, so Mongke Tengri created the first man and woman to populate the world. He perfected their physical forms over time, and then covered their bodies with soft hair. Once Tengri was satisfied with his creations, he decided to fetch water from the Spring of Immortality so that the first man and woman could live forever. Worried about their safety, Tengri commanded a cat and a dog to guard the humans. But once he left for the Spring of Immortality, Erlik Khan, the Lord of the Underworld, tempted the cat away with a bowl of milk, and the dog with a piece of meat, and then defiled Tengri's creations by urinating all over them.



Burial stone
The early Turkic people buried their dead in the Earth created by Tengri, and erected burial stones, such as this 6th-century one, to mark the graves.

THE CAT AND THE DOG

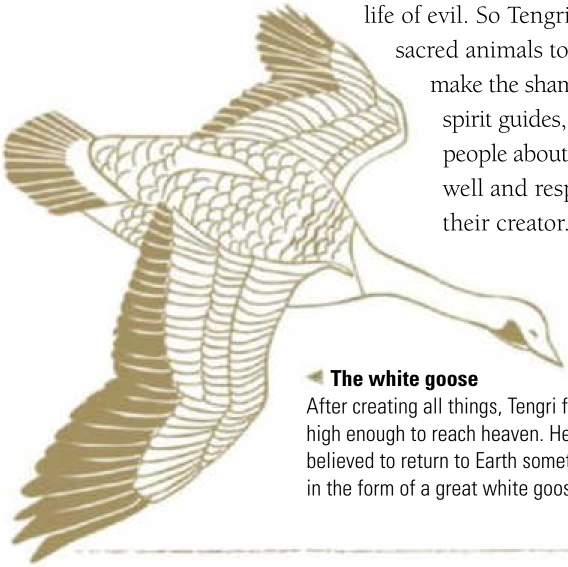
When Tengri returned, he was enraged to find out that Erlik Khan had tainted his creations; he was especially angry with the cat and the dog because they had failed in their task of watching over and protecting the man and woman. Consequently, Tengri punished the animals by making the cat lick off all the body hair from the humans and stick it on the dog's skin. The cat licked off almost all the hair from their bodies, excluding that on their heads, which Erlik Khan had not polluted, and some on the lower parts of their bodies – which the cat avoided because they gave off a foul odour. Once the cat had finished the task, Tengri took the water of eternal life and poured it over his creations in an attempt to immortalize them, but he failed in this venture because the humans had been polluted by Erlik Khan's foul deed.



Primal tortoise

THE TURKIC CREATION STORY

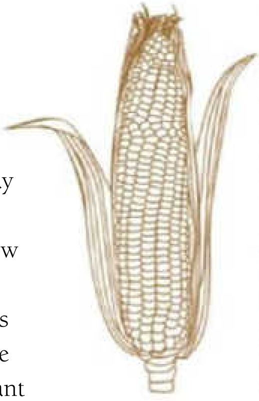
In the Turkic version of the creation story, Tengri flew across the sky as a white goose, over an enormous ocean symbolizing the endless flow of time. He heard a being called the White Mother asking him to create the world. Tengri made another being called Er Kishi, and together they made the Earth and its inhabitants. But Er Kishi was impure, and tried to seduce the people into leading a life of evil. So Tengri sent his sacred animals to Earth to make the shamans, or spirit guides, teach the people about living well and respecting their creator.



The white goose
After creating all things, Tengri flew high enough to reach heaven. He was believed to return to Earth sometimes in the form of a great white goose.

TENGRI AND NATURE

The early Turkic and Mongol people attributed many of the strongest natural phenomena to Tengri and other gods and spirits. Thunder was supposed to symbolize Tengri's voice; lightning was a means of punishment and a display of Tengri's power. Tengri's storms were beneficial as well, because the plants grew and the crops flourished after the rain. These people considered all living beings – birds, animals, plants, and trees – to be inhabited by individual spirits. This meant that everything in nature was sacred.

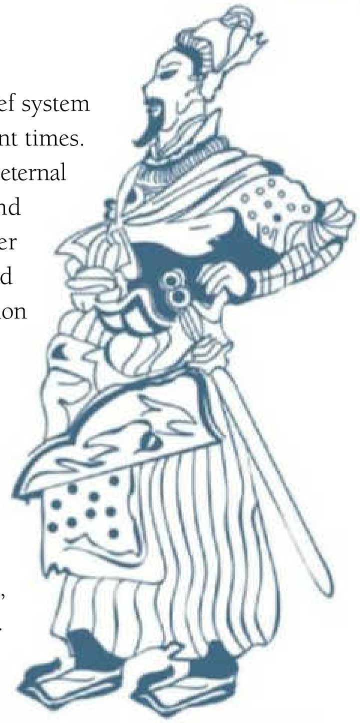


Maize

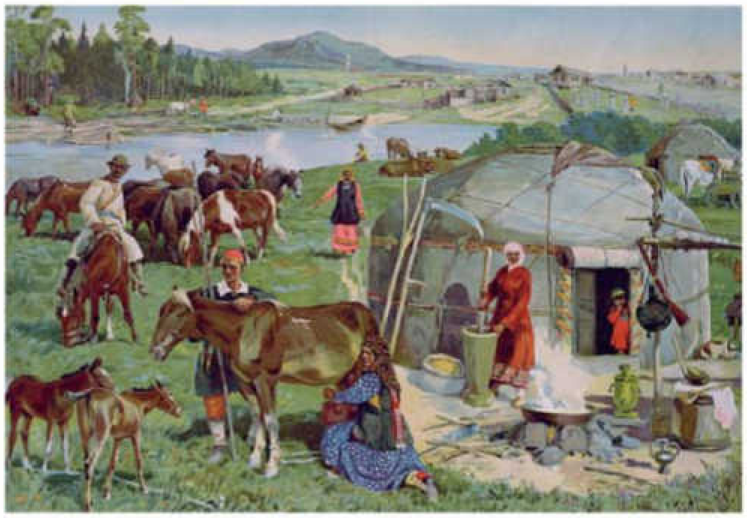
Bolts of lightning
Tengri was said to have lit the first fire with one of his lightning bolts. Lightning and fire had long been worshipped in West and Central Asia; they could not only cleanse the world, but ward off demons.

TENGRISM

Tengrism is the modern term for the belief system of the Mongol and Turkic people of ancient times. Based on Mongke Tengri (representing the eternal blue sky), Eje (a female fertility figure and a Mother Earth goddess), and many other benign and malign nature spirits, it involved the practice of shamanism, or communication with spirits. Tengrism was promoted by later Turkic rulers such as Genghis Khan (reigned 1206–27) and his grandson, Batu Khan (reigned 1227–55). Its followers respected nature spirits and led a life of moral rectitude. If people lost their balance with the natural world due to their actions or the action of malign spirits, the shamans would intervene to restore it.



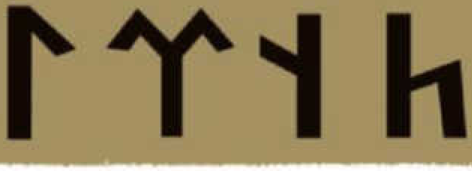
Turkic ruler Batu Khan



A simple life
The early Turks and Mongols lived in harmony with nature. They settled in fertile areas near rivers, which were conducive not only to agriculture, but also provided suitable pastures for their cattle and horses.

TENGRI IN THE EAST

Linguists have long noticed the similarity between the name Tengri and the Chinese word for sky, *tian*, which also means god. It is not known whether one word led to the other, but the two are related, just like the Chinese and Mongol cultures. The two terms appear together in the names of mountains, which are considered sacred places. In the Tian Shan (Sky Mountain) range on the border of Kazakhstan, the second highest peak is known as Khan Tengri (Lord of the Spirits).



"Tengri" in Orkhon (old Turkic script)

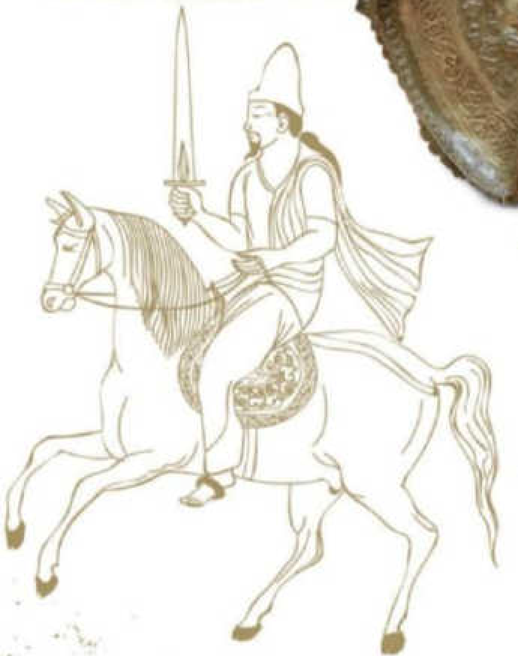
ANIMAL MYTHS OF MONGOLIA

The Mongol people of Central Asia – especially the group of tribes known as the Khalkha – developed a way of life that was hard but well adapted to the grasslands of their home. Many of their myths feature creatures that the Mongolians found around them, such as the swan, or that explain their specific attributes, such as the buzz of a wasp. Others draw on the animals that were useful in daily life, such as the cow, which was crucial to the Mongols' food supply, and the horse, which played a vital role in everyday life and in warfare.

HORSES AND MEN

Horses, especially white ones, feature in numerous Mongolian myths, with most of the *tengri* appearing on horseback. One of the most powerful among them was a sky spirit called the White Lightning Tengri. He was said to ride a white horse because lightning appears to be white when it strikes in the night sky. Shamans also rode white horses and believed in "spirit horses", mythical creatures that could take them on journeys through the world of spirits. When a shaman speaks of his spirit horse, he is talking about flying across the sky at high speed and with great power, like White Lightning Tengri.

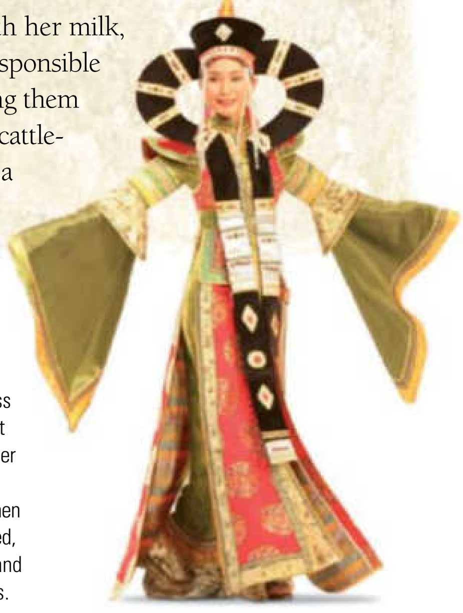
▲ **Saddle fitting**
A good leather saddle, harness, and other horse fittings were essential for the Mongol people, who were often on the move.



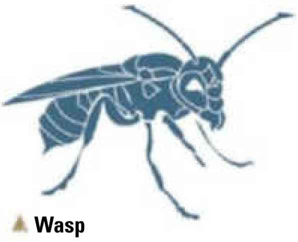
◄ **Kubera**
Kubera, originally belonging to the Hindu pantheon, was seen by the Mongols as a deity of wealth and good fortune, and was often portrayed as a horseman.

SACRED COW

The Khalkha people make up a group of tribes that occupy much of Mongolia. They are cattle-herders, moving from one place to the next in search of the best pastures. Their belief system involves nature spirits, and shamanism lies at the heart of Khalkha communities. The importance of both cattle and nature spirits in the lives of the Khalkha is related to their origin myth, which explains how one of the spirits fell in love with a primal cow. The result of their love was the first Khalkha family, which was brought up by the cow. She fed the people with her milk, and was responsible for inspiring them to take up cattle-herding as a way of life.

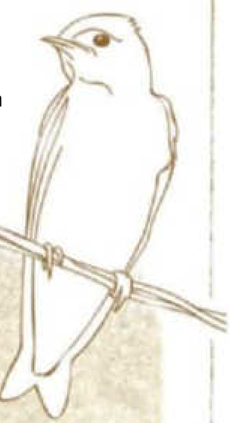


► **Khalkha dress**
The traditional dress has projections that resemble the shoulder blades or horns of cattle. Married women wear their hair parted, combed upwards, and stiffened like horns.



Wasp
The Mongols considered the wasp to be aggressive and well suited to its task of sampling the flesh of other creatures.

Swallow
The myth emphasizes the swallow's playful nature. The bird spends its time in joyful flight, ignoring the fact that it is supposed to be working for the eagle.



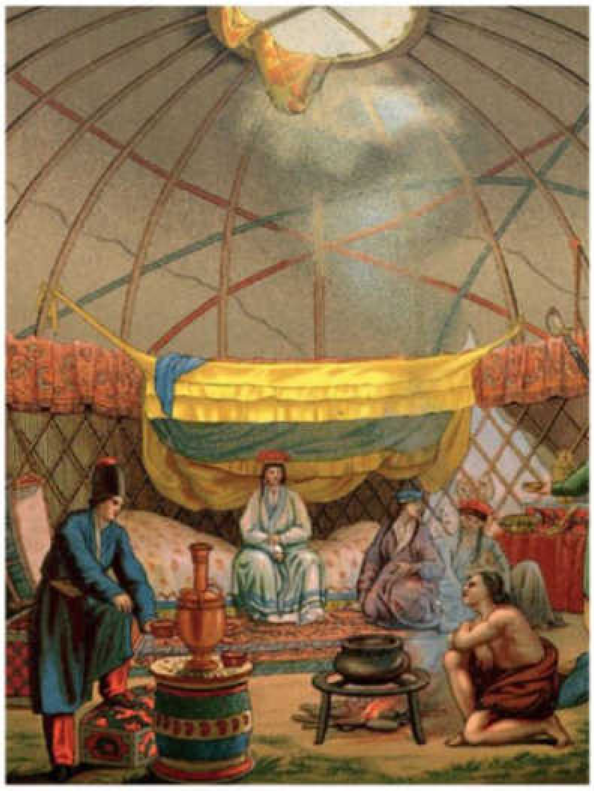
THE EAGLE, THE WASP, AND THE SWALLOW

At the beginning of time, the eagle – the king of flying creatures – wondered what to eat. So he asked the wasp and the swallow to taste the meat of all living things and tell him which was the best. The wasp flew quickly to each creature, biting into its flesh at every stop. The swallow, on the other hand, spent all his time flying across the blue sky and forgot about his task. At the end of the day, the two met up and the swallow asked the wasp which meat tasted the best, to which the wasp replied "human flesh". But the swallow thought that eating humans could bring trouble to the eagle. It bit off the wasp's tongue so that all it could do was buzz. Then the swallow told the eagle that snake meat tasted the best, and eagles have loved to eat serpents ever since.

THE TIGER DANCE

A favourite figure in Mongolian mythology is Tsagaan Ebugen (White Old Man), who got his name because of his white robe and hair. Originally a fertility deity, he was also considered to be a god of animals, birds, rivers, and mountains. He carried a staff topped with a dragon's head, which people believed he used to heal animals, or make them ill. He had a special role to play in the welcoming of the new year, so every year a shaman dressed as Tsagaan Ebugen would arrive at the place where people gathered to celebrate. A tiger skin would be displayed, which the old man would beat with his stick, symbolically killing the animal and acquiring its strength. He would then begin to dance and drink large amounts of alcohol, until he was so drunk that he could no longer dance.

Mongolian tiger mask
The tiger, a symbol of vitality and new life, was represented in masks used for many different Mongolian rituals.



Mongolian ger
Commonly known as a *ger* or *yurt*, the traditional Mongolian tent has a skylight. It was through this that the swan woman tried to fly to escape from her husband.

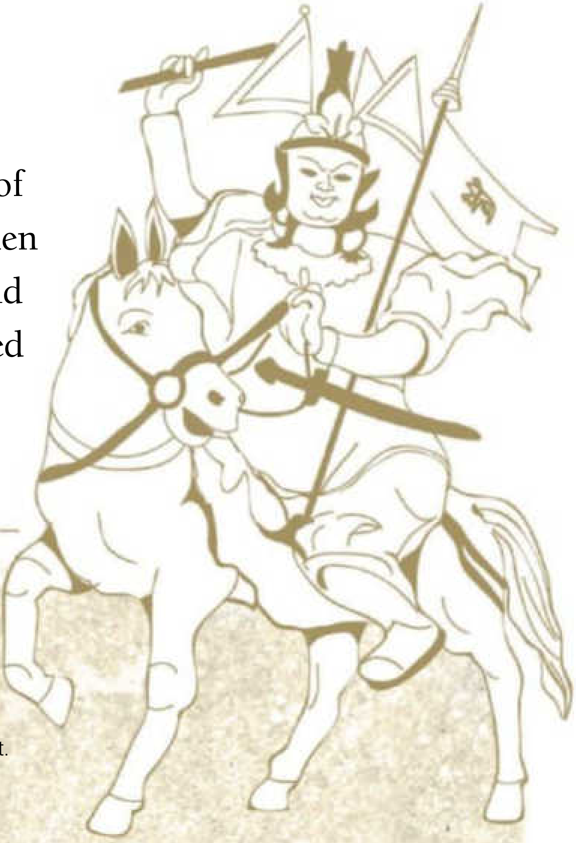
THE SWAN WOMAN

One day, a man saw nine swans flying across Lake Baikal in southern Siberia. After landing, the birds removed their feathered dresses to bathe, transforming into beautiful young women. The man hid one of the dresses, so that when they finished bathing, only eight of the swans could fly away. After wooing the remaining swan woman, he made her his wife, and they had 11 sons. One day, she pleaded with him to let her try on the dress and he allowed her to. As she put it on, she flew upwards, but the man was quicker and caught her feet, preventing her from escaping. But he realized that she wanted to leave desperately, so, after their sons had all been named, the man let the swan woman put on her dress once again and fly away.

At home again
After bidding farewell to her family, the swan woman flew around the tent, blessing it, and then returned to her native home on the lake.

THE EPIC OF GESAR KHAN

Told by both the Tibetan and the Mongol peoples, the story of Gesar Khan is set in Ling, Tibet. The myth describes a time when the people were oppressed by warlords, treachery was rife, and famine was endemic. It is based on the life of a brave hero called Gesar, who came to the rescue of his people, battling with traitors and demons until the kingdom was finally made safe.



Gesar Khan
A skilled rider, Gesar had a horse called Kyang Go Karkar, which was strong and resilient.

THE MYTH

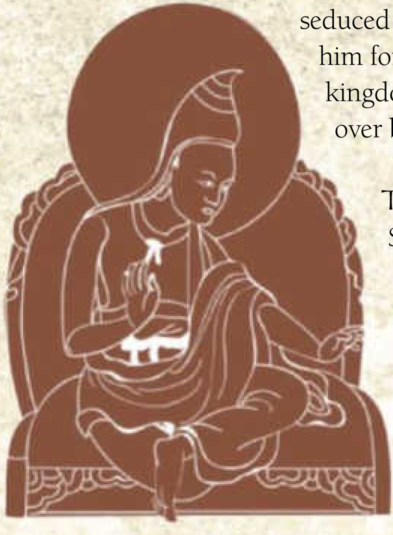
Gesar was originally called Joru, and was the son of a dragon princess who had taken the form of a servant girl called Dzeden. When her pregnancy became apparent, the Queen of Ling threw her out of the castle because she believed that her husband, King Singlen, was the father of the unborn child.

When Joru was born, he seemed unremarkable. He was short and ugly, and very mischievous. Some disliked him, especially the king's brother, Todong, a power-hungry man who sensed that Joru was destined for greatness. He tried to have Joru killed but the boy escaped, and Dzeden took him to live in the woods, away from danger. He grew up into a handsome young man, skilled in shape-changing.

THE CONTEST FOR KINGSHIP

Gesar returned to the palace after receiving a message from a Buddhist monk, named Padmasambhava, that he was destined to become a saviour of his people. On arriving, he found out that the king had left on a pilgrimage, and Todong was hoping to rule in his stead. In the guise of a prophetic raven, Gesar told Todong that he could rule Ling if he staged and won a horse race, in which anyone could participate. He could also marry Sechan Dugmo – a beautiful woman who led an unhappy life with her miserly father, but who was destined to become queen. An accomplished horseman, Todong organized the race because he was confident of his victory. It was decreed that the winner of the race would become king and marry Sechan Dugmo. Gesar defeated Todong easily, and became the King of Ling, with Sechan Dugmo as his queen.

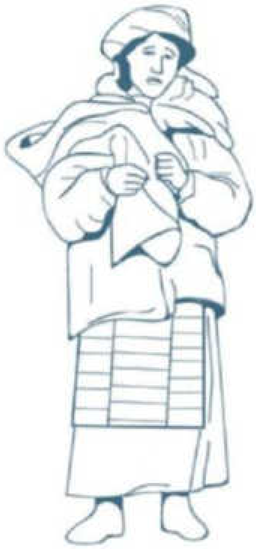
While Tibet prospered under Gesar's rule, Todong plotted to usurp his throne by allying with a monstrous demon called Lutzen. Gesar fought the demon, and chopped off its 12 heads. But Lutzen's wife, a stunning enchantress, seduced Gesar by giving him a cup of wine that made him forget everything but her. He forsook his kingdom, which fell into decline and was taken over by a demon king called Kurkar.



Padmasambhava
A Buddhist monk named Padmasambhava spread Buddhism in Tibet in the 8th century. Revered by Tibetan Buddhists, he is seen as a second Buddha.

THE RETURN OF GESAR

Six years later, Gesar's brother found him and told him what had happened. Gesar returned to his kingdom disguised as a boy skilled in metalwork. He used his skill to distract and kill Kurkar, while his men destroyed the demon's army. After this, he had to defeat another demon called Shingti, who had a virtuous daughter. Despite his enmity with Todong, Gesar was fond of Todong's son, and arranged his marriage to Shingti's daughter. The couple became heirs to his throne, ending the conflict with Todong.

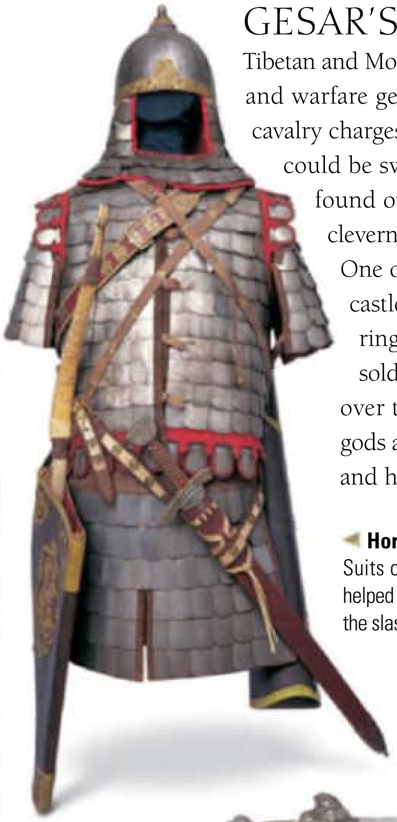


THE BIRTH OF GESAR

Dzeden was a shape-changer, who had transformed into a human girl when she inadvertently wandered far away from her home and took shelter in the kingdom of Ling. One night, she had a prophetic dream, in which a great lord told her that she would give birth to her country's saviour. Nine months later, an egg popped out of her head. She nursed it, and her son hatched from the egg. Dzeden named him Joru, and he grew up to be a strong man.

Dzeden
One version of the myth says that Dzeden, in her vision, drank nectar from a golden vase with an image of a lord on the side, and became pregnant.

Ladakh
Home to people of Tibetan descent, Ladakh, a plateau between the Kunlun Mountains and Greater Himalayas in Kashmir, is believed by some to be the birthplace of Gesar Khan.



GESAR'S BATTLES

Tibetan and Mongol life centred on the horse, and warfare generally involved aggressive cavalry charges by armoured warriors, who could be swift and ruthless. But Gesar found out that besides aggression, cleverness was also needed for victory. One of his enemies, Lutzen, had a castle guarded by three defensive rings, comprising gods, human soldiers, and demons. Gesar took over the castle by persuading the gods and humans to fight on his side and help him defeat the demons.

Horseman's armour
Suits of plate armour and strong helmets helped protect Gesar's mounted warriors from the slashing sword blows of their enemies.

Tibetan sword
Gesar succeeded in distracting Kurkar by posing as a metalworker who could forge fine weapons for the demon.

GESAR RESCUES HIS QUEEN

Gesar Khan rescued his wife, Sechan Dugmo, from a sorry fate on two separate occasions. By marrying her after the horse race, Gesar freed Sechan from a miserable life with her miserly father. He also saved her from the demon Kurkar, who had seized Gesar's kingdom and imprisoned his queen. Gesar's deep affection for his beloved queen equalled his love for his homeland, which he saved twice from tyrannical rule.

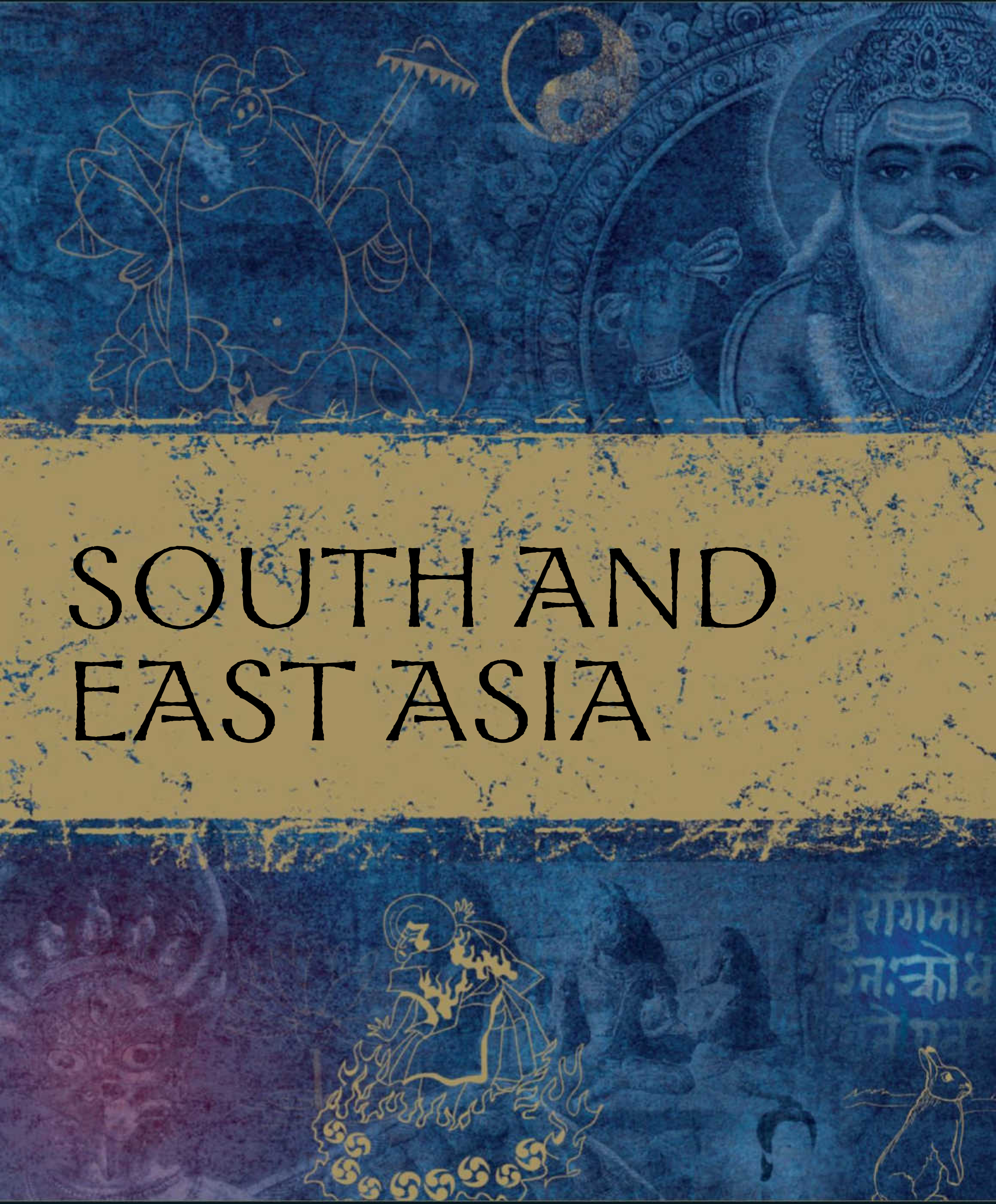
Racing horses
Gesar, a poor outcast, turned up in tattered rags for the race organized by Todong, but the other riders dressed up in fine clothes, as horse races were grand occasions.

The Kham region
From Mount Margyer Pongri in the Kham region of eastern Tibet, Gesar Khan and Sechan Dugmo bid farewell to their faithful and loving subjects, and disappeared forever.

GESAR'S PASSING

Todong's son married the daughter of the demon Shingti, and the pair became the new king and queen of Gesar's kingdom. In spite of their demonic parentage, they were virtuous rulers, and Gesar was convinced that the kingdom would be safe in their hands. So Gesar and Sechan Dugmo decided to retire. They went on a retreat to the side of a mountain in the Kham region, and disappeared the next day. It was believed that they had ascended either to the next world, or to the paradise of Shambala, the mythical home of the spirit kings.

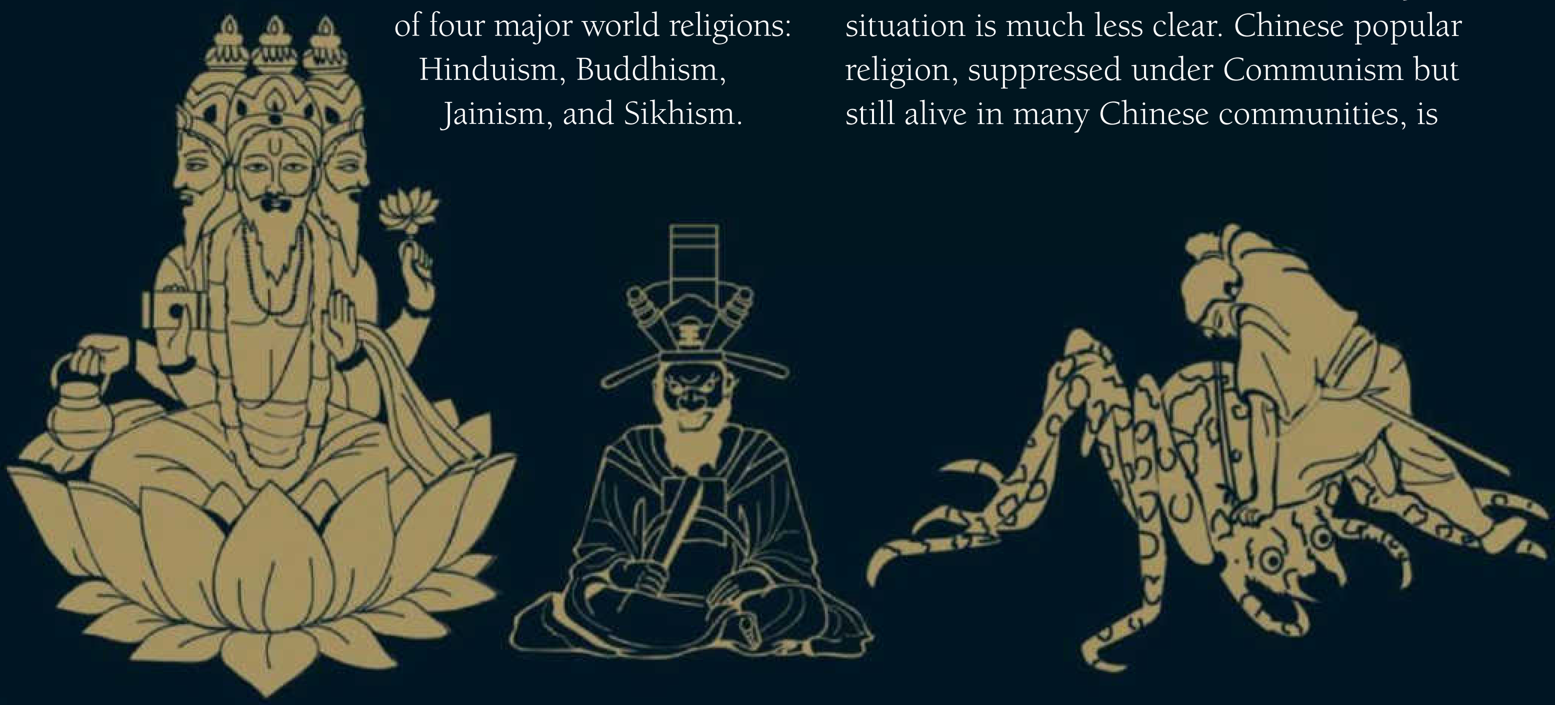
SOUTH AND EAST ASIA



In isolation from other parts of the world for extended periods, India, China, and Japan developed their own distinctive early civilizations. The cultures of these countries were very different, but they did have certain things in common. One of the strongest links was the faith of Buddhism, which emerged from India in the 5th or 6th century BCE, and later spread out to the rest of South and East Asia. In both China and Japan, the influence of Buddhism became even more pervasive than in its country of origin.

The mythologies of India, China, and Japan are very different too, but have one common element – a pantheon containing an almost uncountable number of deities and spirits. There are more gods in South and East Asia than in any other part of the world. The Indian subcontinent alone is the home of four major world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Of the four, it was Hinduism that developed a mythology with many deities, a pantheon of beings who preside over a universe in a constantly turning cycle of history. From little-known local gods to great figures such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva – the trinity who preside over the whole cosmos as creator, preserver, and destroyer, respectively – Hindu deities all have their own stories, personalities, and attributes. They are unified by the concept that, although they are distinct, they all form aspects of one single reality.

China's vast family of gods and goddesses are organized in a very different way. They are seen as an imperial court, headed by a supreme emperor, who is the cosmic equivalent of the human emperor that once ruled China. In theory, each deity has a role analogous to an official or courtier on Earth, but in reality the situation is much less clear. Chinese popular religion, suppressed under Communism but still alive in many Chinese communities, is

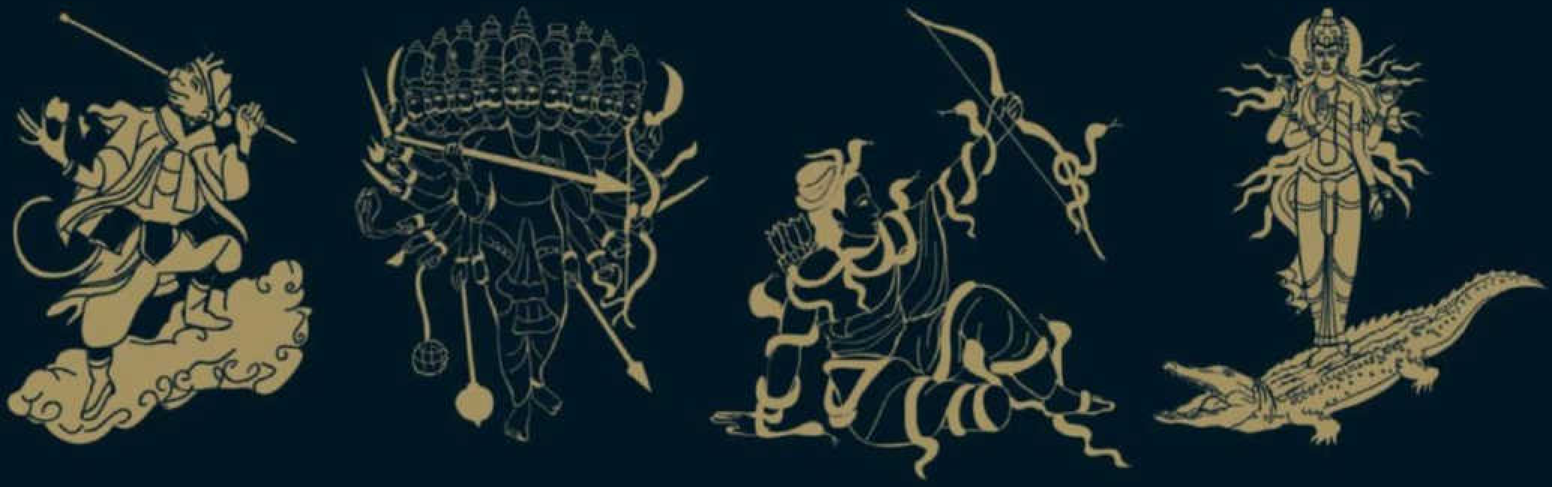


> IN THE VASTNESS OF MY NATURE I PLACE THE SEED OF THINGS TO COME; AND FROM THIS UNION COMES THE BIRTH OF ALL BEINGS.
>
> *Bhagavad Gita, 14:3*

highly creative, adding deities to the pantheon and worshipping them as and when devotees need specific help or guidance in their daily lives. Figures from belief systems such as Buddhism and Daoism have been added to the pantheon – and there are even instances of a Chinese version of Jesus being worshipped in the temples of Chinese popular religion. This is an endlessly inventive form of belief, little known outside China and Chinese communities in places such as Singapore.

In Japan, the original indigenous people – the Ainu – have their own religion and mythology, which contains numerous spirits of the natural world. Their stories are told in oral epics in which the spirits take the form of animals such as bears and whales and interact with people.

The notion of a spirit world is central to the more widespread Japanese belief system, Shintoism – “the way of the gods”. Shintoism is concerned with maintaining a balance between humankind and the natural world. Its myths – including important stories about the sun deity and the origins of rice cultivation – tackle this subject in many ways. As well as the origins of rice-growing, the origins of such essentially Japanese skills as silkworm breeding are attributed to the work of a culture hero. Even in today’s highly advanced – and in many ways Westernized – Japanese society, these stories still feature prominently in the country’s culture, hold Japanese people’s imaginations, and help shape their fundamental beliefs.

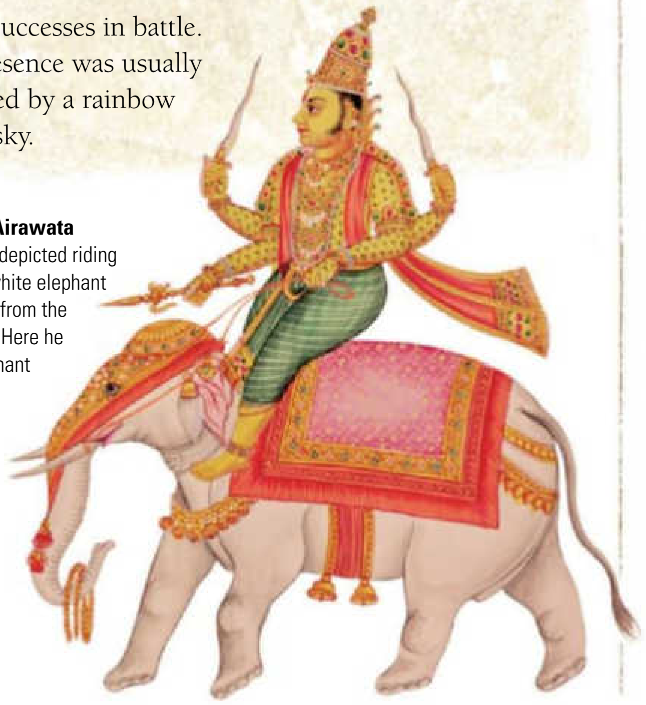


THE VEDIC GODS

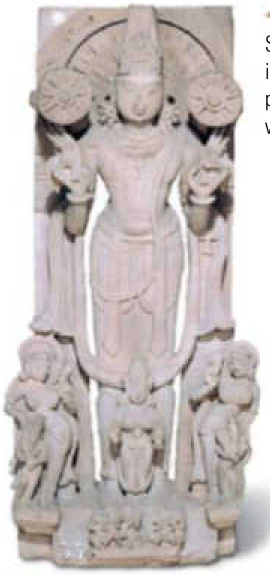
Some of India's earliest myths are derived from the Aryans, people of Central Asian origin who migrated to the region during the 2nd millennium BCE. Their myths were recorded in sacred texts known as the Vedas, which emphasized belief in gods that controlled the natural world and could influence human wellbeing. Chief among the Vedic deities were figures such as Indra, Agni, and Surya. These early deities were often known as the Adityas, or sons of Aditi, the goddess of space and mother of all creatures and deities.

INDRA

The god of thunder and rain, Indra was the chief of the Vedic gods and known for his strength and virility. He used his powerful *vajra* (thunderbolt) to attack demons who interfered with the process of creation, or threatened life. A popular myth tells how Indra gained his supremacy over the other gods. Once, Vritra (also known as Ahi, the serpent of drought) swallowed the cosmic waters and held back rains. Most gods ran away in fright, but Indra pierced the serpent's body with his *vajra*, allowing the vital waters to flow once again. Indra was worshipped as a provider of cattle and a deity who brought material wealth and wellbeing. The warrior classes especially grew to revere him because of his many successes in battle. His presence was usually signalled by a rainbow in the sky.

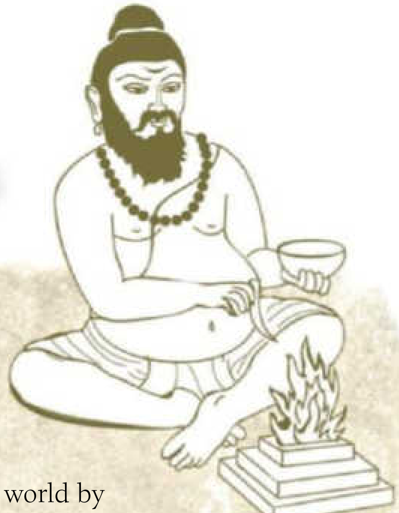


► **Indra on Airawata**
Indra is often depicted riding Airawata, a white elephant that emerged from the primal ocean. Here he holds an elephant goad and two thunderbolts (*vajras*).



◄ **Giver of Life**
Surya is sometimes shown holding lotus flowers in his hands, which represent the deity's life-giving powers. His attendants include two female figures who symbolize the two phases of the dawn.

▼ **The sage Agastya**
In the *Ramayana*, Agastya recites a hymn associated with Surya to Rama before his battle with the demon king, Ravana. It is believed that he introduced Vedic religion into southern India.

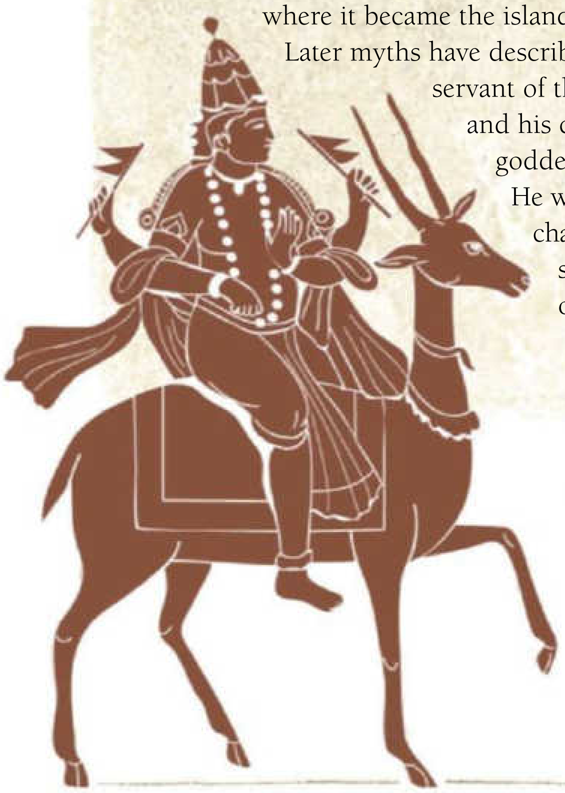


SURYA

Also known as *Savitar* (Giver of Life), Surya, the sun god, watched over the world by day, and was said to bring light, knowledge, and life itself to its inhabitants. He travelled across the sky in a chariot with a single wheel, signifying the cycle of the seasons. His charioteer, Aruna, the god of the morning, shielded the world from Surya's extreme heat. A myth tells how Sanjana, a goddess who married Surya, could not bear his brightness, so she turned herself into a mare and hid in the forest. When Surya found her, he changed into a stallion and fathered several children with her. He agreed to reduce his brilliance, and the pair returned to their palace in the heavens.

VAYU

Vayu was the god of the winds. One of the hymns of the *Rig Veda* portrays Vayu as either the breath of *Purusha*, the primal human, or as being created by *Purusha's* breath. According to a myth about Vayu, the god lost some of his power when he was expelled from Mount Meru, the home of the gods. Vayu attacked the mountain in retaliation, and despite resistance from Garuda, the king of the birds, he tore off the tip of the mountain and threw it into the ocean, where it became the island of Sri Lanka. Later myths have described Vayu as a servant of the god Vishnu and his consort, the goddess Lakshmi. He was a changeable character, at times stormy, but on other occasions gentle.

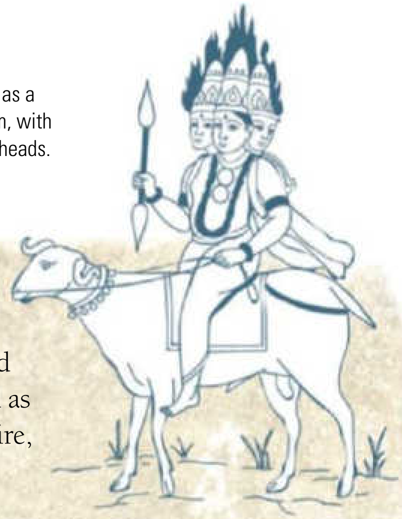


Vayu on his mount
Vayu is commonly portrayed seated on his mount, an elegant antelope. Sometimes, however, he is depicted riding a lion. Perhaps the differing mounts indicate the changeable character of their rider.

SOMA AND RITUALS

Like many early belief systems, Vedic religion involved the use of psychoactive substances, such as *soma*, a plant that could be identified with the herb ephedra. *Soma* was said to be the drink of the gods, and when mortals drank it, they made a connection with the deities. Accounts of its origin vary – some say Indra discovered *soma*, others that it was first produced from the primal ocean. Its use was quite popular among Vedic priests, who developed a special ritual for preparing the drink: first crushing the herb, and then mixing it with milk and water.

Ephedra



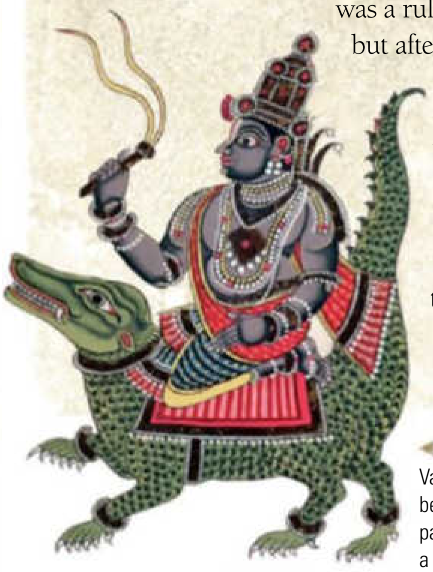
God of fire
Numerous accounts of Agni depict him as a three-headed figure riding a goat or ram, with flames coming out of each of his three heads.

AGNI

The god Agni represented fire in all its aspects, such as lightning, the domestic fire, and fires used in rituals, which were all seen as his manifestations. As ritual fire, Agni took messages from humans to the gods, his smoke indicating where sacrifices were being made, while the fire lit at funeral pyres carried the souls to heaven. Agni, who was the son of Prithvi (Mother Earth) and Dyaus (Father Sky), was said to have been born three times: first from water, like the sun rising above the sea; then from the air, as lightning; and finally on Earth, in the form of fire that was kindled. He was so hungry that he ate his parents, and then grew tongues to lap the ghee (clarified butter) offered at altars.

VARUNA

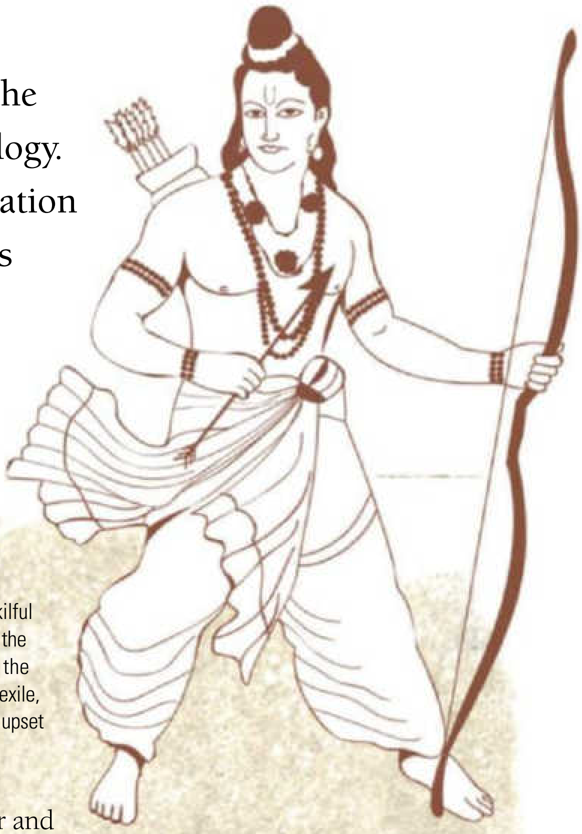
The god of the sky, Varuna was the celestial lawgiver. He was the master of the rules that governed sacrifices and of the order that dictated the seasons and the annual round of sowing and harvesting. Some early myths describe him as a creator god, who formed the worlds of heaven, middle air, and Earth by his willpower alone. In another story, he was a ruler of the heavenly ocean, but after a war with the demons, the gods reallocated their powers and Varuna became the ruler of the western sky and of the earthly seas. His rule extended to the tides, and he was said to be the patron god of sailors and fishermen.



The god of the sky and seas
Varuna rode a *makara*, a mythical beast that was part-crocodile and part-fish. His mount was seen as a symbol of water and fertility.

THE RAMAYANA

The *Ramayana* is one of the two great Indian epics written in the ancient Sanskrit language, and a seminal text in Hindu mythology. It tells the story of Rama, the Prince of Ayodhya and an incarnation of Vishnu, from his upbringing, through his exile, to rescue his wife, Sita, from the demon king Ravana's clutches. Through its depiction of the main characters, theepic extols the virtues of loyalty, kinship, devotion, and duty.



Prince Rama
Rama was famous as a skilful archer – his prowess with the bow enabled him to win the hand of Sita and, while in exile, to defeat the demons that upset the peace of the forest.

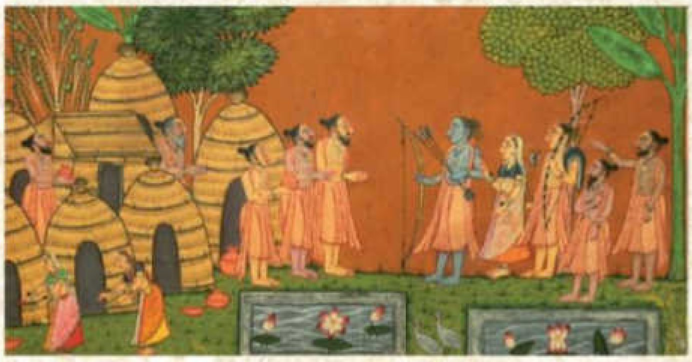
THE MYTH

Dasharatha, the King of Ayodhya, had three wives who bore him four sons: Rama, Lakshmana, Shatrughna, and Bharata. Rama was the eldest and the probable heir to the throne of Ayodhya. As a young man, he learned archery from the sage Vishwamitra. When Rama and Lakshmana were older, they were taken by Vishwamitra to the city of Mithila, where King Janaka had organized a competition to select a husband for his daughter, Sita. The competitors were required to string a great bow that had once belonged to Shiva.

Rama, who had fallen in love with Sita, was the only one who was able to string the bow – he not only strung it, but broke it too. Rama won the contest and returned home with his wife.

RAMA'S EXILE

The time came when Dasharatha had to select an heir from among his sons. He wanted to choose his eldest son, Rama, who was an ideal prince in every way. But one of Rama's stepmothers, Kaikeyi, reminded Dasharatha of a boon he had once promised her and demanded that he make her son, Bharata, the heir instead, and send Rama into exile so that he would not pose a threat to Bharata. Bound by his vow, the sad king banished his eldest son to the forest for 14 years. Rama obeyed his father unquestioningly. Sita and Lakshmana insisted on accompanying him.



Exiled in the forest
When Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana arrived in the forest, they met the hermits who lived there, and had to adapt to their simple way of living, which was very different from the life of luxury that the royals knew.

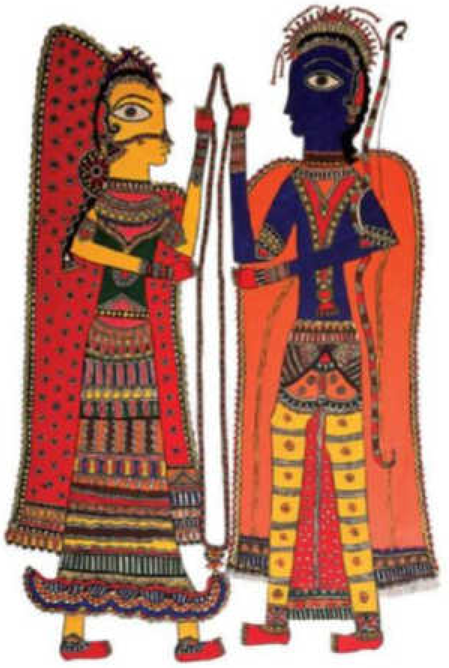
Dasharatha died of grief soon after Rama's departure. Bharata, who had been absent from the palace during this time, was recalled to ascend to the throne of Ayodhya. Horrified by his mother's greed, he insisted that Rama was the rightful king, and travelled to the forest to bring Rama back. However, Rama refused to disobey his father's last wish, and Bharata had no option but to return home to be crowned as the next king. He devised an honourable compromise so that he could obey their father and show respect to Rama at the same time. Bharata took a pair of Rama's sandals back to Ayodhya and ritually enthroned them, to symbolize his rule as regent on behalf of his exiled stepbrother till the day that Rama returned.

Meanwhile, the exiles settled down, adapting to the hard life of the forest. Rama and Lakshmana frequently fought off demons who attacked the ascetics living in the woods and threatened their lives, or interrupted their prayers, rituals, and meditation. The ascetics were grateful to Rama and Lakshmana for their selfless deeds. Some of them realized that Rama was in fact a divine being.

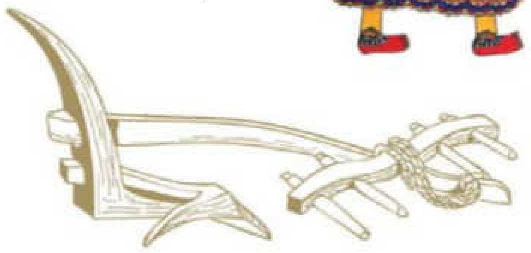
»

RAMA AND SITA

In the epic, Rama and Sita are portrayed as the ideal couple. Rama wins his wife in a contest of strength, and fights fearlessly to rescue her when she is abducted. Similarly, Sita is considered the perfect devoted wife. However, Rama has been seen by some as a flawed hero who failed to appreciate Sita's goodness by doubting her chastity twice. Some accounts interpret Rama's actions as befitting a just ruler who has to place ideals of kingship above all personal bonds.



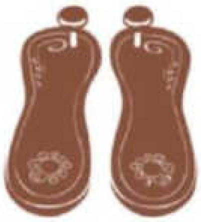
Rama's marriage
Rama and Sita show their mutual devotion through their actions – she, by following him to his forest exile, and he, by rescuing her from the demon king, Ravana.



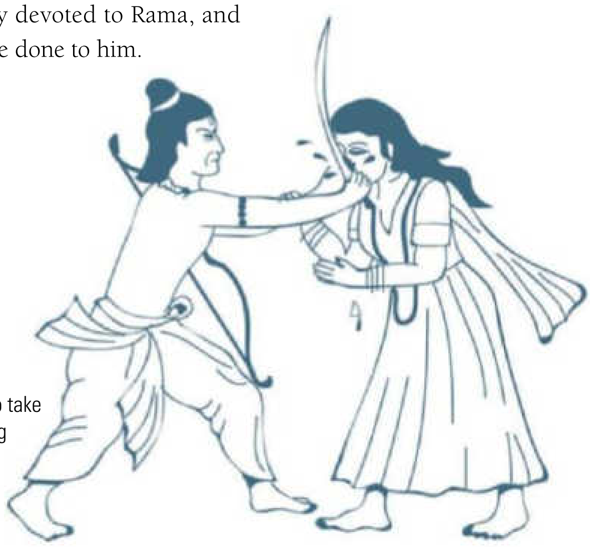
Plough
Sita's name means "furrow". Her father found her in a furrow in the the soil while ploughing his fields.

THE IDEAL OF BROTHERHOOD

Brotherhood is thematically integral to the *Ramayana*. The ideal brother is Lakshmana – he accompanies Rama and Sita into exile, guards them, and aids Rama in his battles with the demons and in his rescue of Sita. Bharata, too, shows his love for Rama by overriding his kingly aspirations and placing Rama's sandals on the throne. Shatrughna is similarly devoted to Rama, and outraged at the injustice done to him.



Rama's sandals

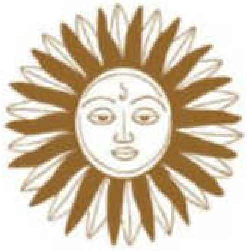


Lakshmana
When Ravana's sister tried to take revenge on Rama for spurning her advances, Lakshman cut off her nose.

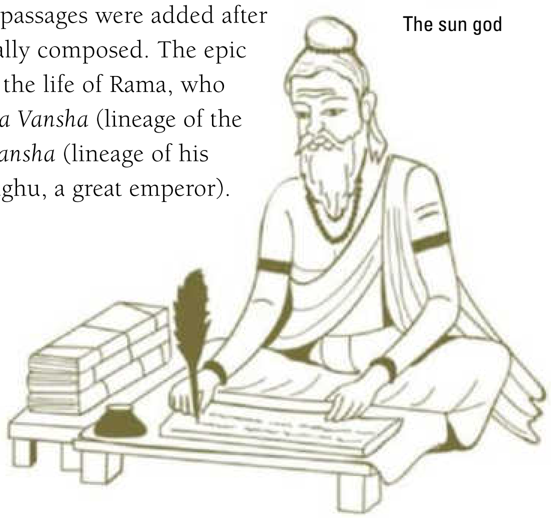
> FROM THY FEET CAST FORTH THOSE SANDALS, THEY SHALL DECORATE THE THRONE.
>
> Valmiki, *Ramayana*

THE EPIC

The *Ramayana*, one of the great works of world literature, is said to have been written by a sage, Valmiki, who plays a role in the epic, but may also have been a real person. Varying accounts place its date of compilation between 500 BCE and 200 CE. Valmiki probably did not write the entire poem; several passages were added after the work was originally composed. The epic primarily deals with the life of Rama, who belonged to the *Surya Vansha* (lineage of the sun god) or *Raghu Vansha* (lineage of his great-grandfather, Raghu, a great emperor).



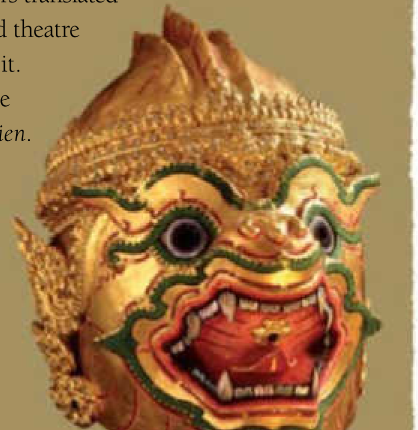
The sun god



Sage Valmiki
In the epic, Valmiki is a sage who lives in the forest, and is often visited by Rama and Sita during their exile. When the pair are estranged, Valmiki lets Sita stay in his hermitage.

THE RAMAYANA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

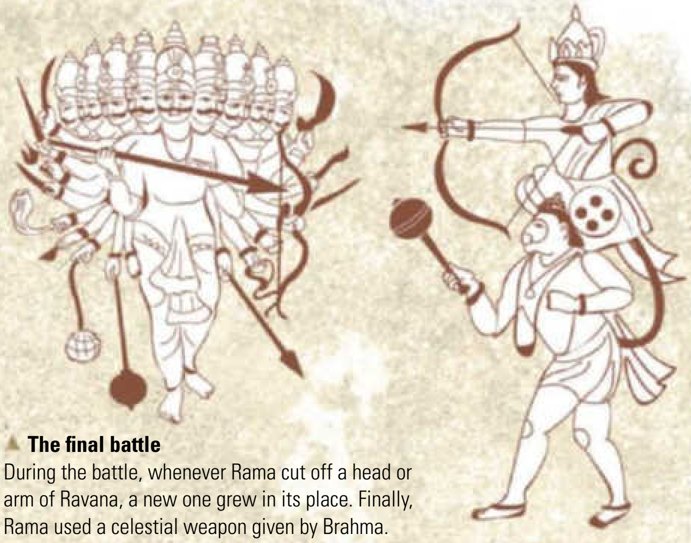
Besides its popularity in India, the *Ramayana* is well known in Southeast Asia. The epic reached Indonesia during the early centuries of the Common Era. In Java, Malaya, and Thailand, local writers translated the Sanskrit text, and theatre companies adapted it. In Thai literature, the epic is called *Ramakien*. Episodes from it are presented in Thai *khon* (mask) plays and in such art forms as the Indonesian puppet and shadow theatre.



Mask used in Thai *khon* plays

SURPANAKHA

One day, a female demon named Surpanakha lusted after Rama and Lakshmana, and made advances towards them. When the brothers rejected her, she tried to attack Sita, and Lakshmana retaliated by cutting off her nose. Surpanakha was infuriated at the way Rama and Lakshmana had treated her, so she went to her brother Ravana, the ten-headed demon ruler of Lanka, and incited him to abduct Sita in revenge. Ravana sent a demon disguised as a golden deer to distract Rama and Sita. When Sita wished to have the creature as a pet, Rama went off in pursuit of the deer. Ravana then tricked Lakshmana into following Rama and, having approached Sita disguised as a hermit, carried her off to Lanka.



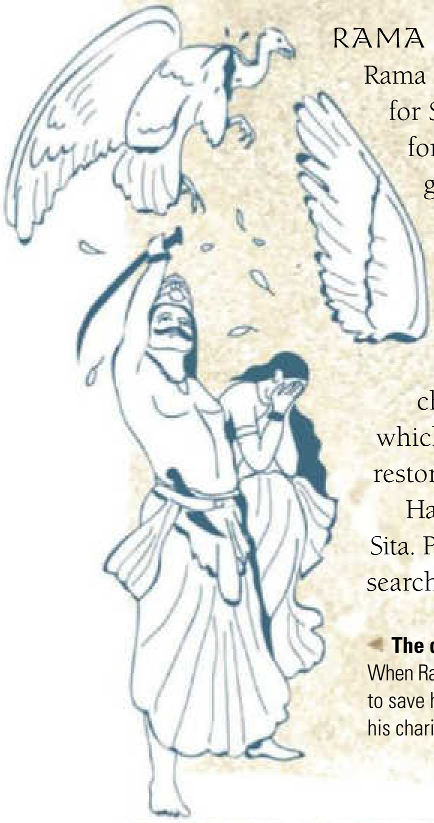
▲ **The final battle**
During the battle, whenever Rama cut off a head or arm of Ravana, a new one grew in its place. Finally, Rama used a celestial weapon given by Brahma.

RAMA AND HANUMAN

Rama and Lakshmana began their search for Sita. On their journey through the forest, they came across the monkey god Hanuman, who served Sugreeva, the monkey king. Sugreeva, like Rama, was also in exile. His brother Vali had taken his place as king. Hanuman asked for Rama's help in removing the usurper. Sugreeva challenged Vali to a duel, during which Rama killed Vali. His kingdom restored, Sugreeva agreed to aid Rama.

Hanuman decided to help in rescuing Sita. Parties of monkeys were sent out to search for her. After many adventures, Hanuman found Sita imprisoned on the island fortress of Lanka. Its location made Lanka difficult to attack, as did the fact that Ravana had an entire army of demons. Hanuman and his monkeys built a bridge over the sea so that they could attack Lanka. In a series of battles, Rama, Lakshmana, Hanuman, and the other monkeys killed the most fearsome demons. Finally, Rama slew Ravana and rescued Sita. Then Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana returned home.

Rama was unsure about accepting Sita as she had been a captive of Ravana. Hurt and distressed, Sita offered to walk through fire to prove her chastity. She emerged unscathed, but back in Ayodhya, a chance remark by a washerman prompted Rama to doubt Sita again. She sought refuge in the hermitage of the sage Valmiki, where she gave birth to twin boys. Years later, Rama recognized them as his sons and invited his wife to return after another trial by fire. Tired of constantly having to prove her chastity, Sita appealed to Mother Earth to take her back. On hearing her cry, the ground opened up and Sita disappeared into it.

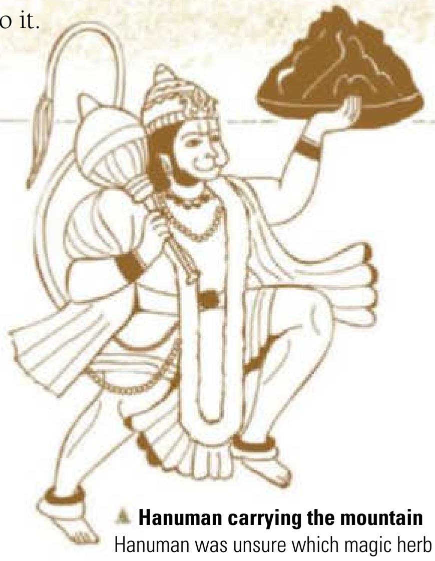


◀ **The death of Jatayu**
When Ravana abducted Sita, an old vulture called Jatayu tried to save her. Jatayu attacked the demon king and destroyed his chariot, but Ravana cut off his wing, so killing him.

ALLIES

Rama's greatest allies in the rescue of Sita were Sugreeva, Hanuman, and their army of monkeys. Hanuman's great strength and powers of shape-changing and flight proved invaluable. He made two journeys to Lanka, the first to locate Sita, and the second to help Rama defeat Ravana and rescue his wife. Having found Sita on the first journey, he was discovered by Ravana's guards who set his long tail on fire, but he survived, setting Lanka ablaze as he escaped. During the final battle in Lanka, many of Rama's warriors, including Lakshmana, were killed. Hanuman fetched a magic herb from the Himalayas to revive them. He was rewarded with everlasting youth for his devotion to Rama.

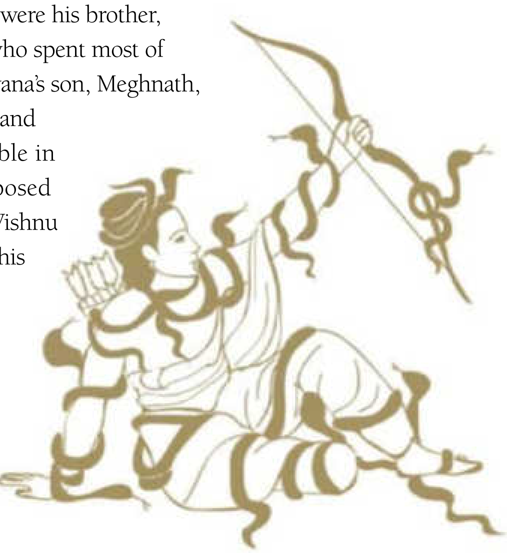
▲ **Sugreeva fighting Vali**
Since Sugreeva and Vali looked alike, Rama told Sugreeva to wear a garland so that Rama could identify him.



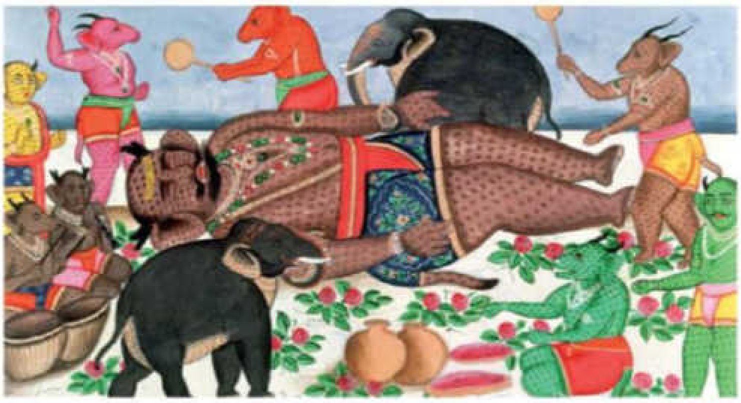
▲ **Hanuman carrying the mountain**
Hanuman was unsure which magic herb would revive Lakshmana, so returned to Rama with the entire mountain of herbs.

ADVERSARIES

In the *Ramayana*, Rama's enemies are referred to as *rakshasas*, or demons. Traditionally, they were malign beings who attacked women and children or possessed people at night, driving them insane. Prominent among the demons helping Ravana were his brother, Kumbhakarna, a giant who spent most of his life sleeping, and Ravana's son, Meghnath, who had defeated Indra and was said to be unbeatable in battle. These demons posed such a great threat that Vishnu had to come to Earth as his avatar, Rama, in order to defeat them for good.



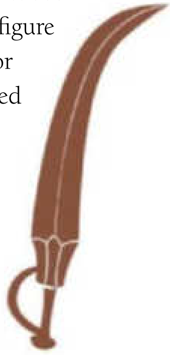
Meghnath
Meghnath's magical serpent arrows vanquished many of the enemy warriors, including Lakshmana.



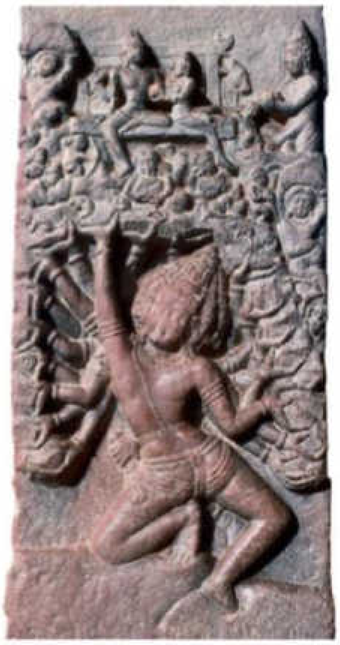
Kumbhakarna
The giant Kumbhakarna had been given a boon whereby he could sleep for six months at a stretch. When he finally awoke to fight for Ravana, he devastated Rama's army before being killed by the prince himself.

RAVANA

The king of the *rakshasas*, Ravana was a fearsome figure with 10 heads and 20 arms. He was a scholar and an authority on the Vedas. He pleased Brahma with his rigorous austerities and arrogantly sought invulnerability against gods and demons, believing no human could harm him. He also appeased Shiva, who gave him a sword. He is seen as either a wicked counterpart to the virtuous Rama, or as a tragic figure who had potential for good but was destined to become evil.



Ravana's sword
Ravana attacked Rama with the *Chandrahas* (moon blade), which he had been given by Shiva.



Ravana moving Kailash
Once Ravana angered Shiva by moving his abode at Mount Kailash, and was punished.

> FOR THIS DEED OF INSULT, RAVANA, IN THY HEEDLESS FOLLY DONE, DEATH OF ALL THY RACE AND KINDRED THOU SHALT REAP FROM RAGHU'S SON!
>
> Valmiki, *Ramayana*

HINDU FESTIVALS

There are some popular Hindu festivals associated with Rama. He is believed to have worshipped the goddess Durga before setting off to fight Ravana. So during the nine nights of the festival of *Navaratri*, episodes from the epic are enacted, with a climax on the tenth day, *Dussehra*, when Rama slew Ravana. On this day, effigies of Ravana, his brother, Kumbhakarna, and his son, Meghnath, are ritually burned to symbolize the victory of good over evil. Rama also has a role in the festival of Diwali. On Diwali, people light lamps to commemorate the return of Rama to Ayodhya after his long exile.

Diwali, the festival of lights

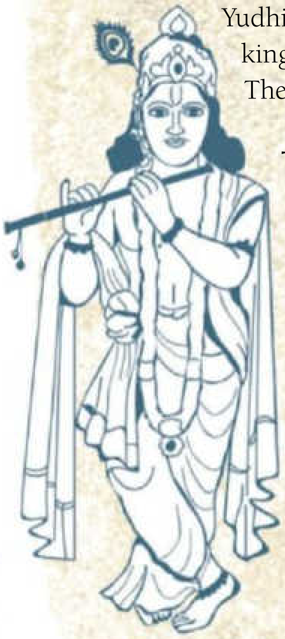
THE MAHABHARATA

One of the longest poems in the world, the *Mahabharata* is the second of the two great ancient Indian epics. Traditionally attributed to the scribe Vyasa, who also compiled the Vedas, the poem was probably composed by several writers between the 8th century BCE and the 4th century CE. The epic centres on a war between two rival families, but it also contains the *Bhagavad Gita*, a sacred text outlining the key tenets of Hinduism.

THE MYTH

The kingdom of Hastinapura was ruled by Pandu of the Bharata dynasty. Pandu died early, so his blind brother, Dhritarashtra, became the king. He brought up Pandu's five sons, known collectively as the Pandavas, along with his own 100 sons, called the Kauravas.

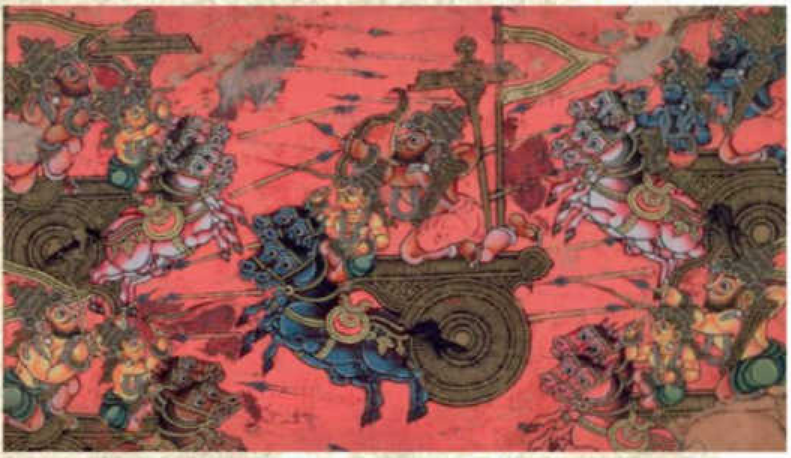
The Pandavas incurred the jealousy of their cousins due to their military prowess, virtuous conduct, and popularity among the common people. When Yudhishthira, Pandu's first-born, was declared heir-apparent, the Kauravas, led by their eldest brother, Duryodhana, conspired to kill the Pandavas. However, their intended victims got wind of the plan and escaped. To settle the quarrel, Dhritarashtra divided his kingdom between Duryodhana and Yudhishthira. But the Kauravas resented this. They invited Yudhishthira to play a game of dice (gambling being one of Yudhishthira's few weaknesses), and kept increasing the stakes. Eventually, Yudhishthira had gambled away his wealth, kingdom, and even his brothers and wife. The Pandavas were banished for 12 years.



Lord Krishna
Krishna took part in the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas on the condition that he would not wield a weapon himself – hence his role as Arjuna's charioteer.

THE ROLE OF KRISHNA

On their return, Duryodhana refused to give back their kingdom, and the rivals prepared for war. Arjuna, Yudhishthira's brother, went to seek the support of his friend Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu. He found Duryodhana already there for the same reason. Since both were his kinsmen, Krishna gave them a choice – one side could have his army, another could have him. Duryodhana chose the army, whereas Arjuna preferred to have Krishna, who then offered to be his charioteer.



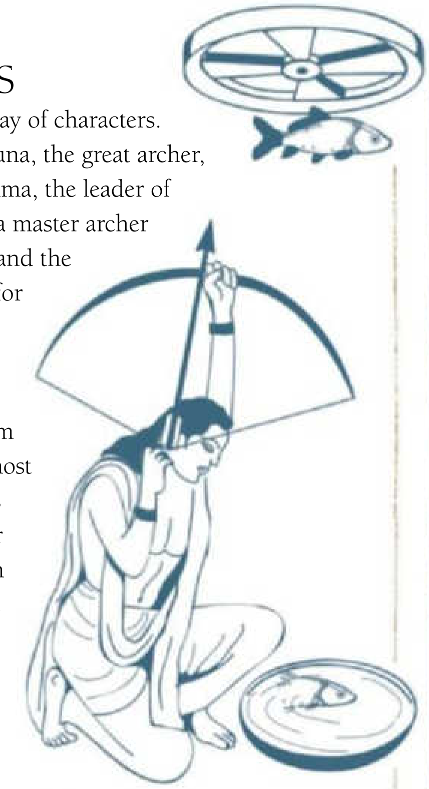
The great war
One of the greatest conflicts in Indian mythology, 18 military divisions took part in this colossal war. The epic describes the complex battle formations used by the forces, and the war diplomacy and strategies employed by both sides.

THE BATTLE AND ITS AFTERMATH

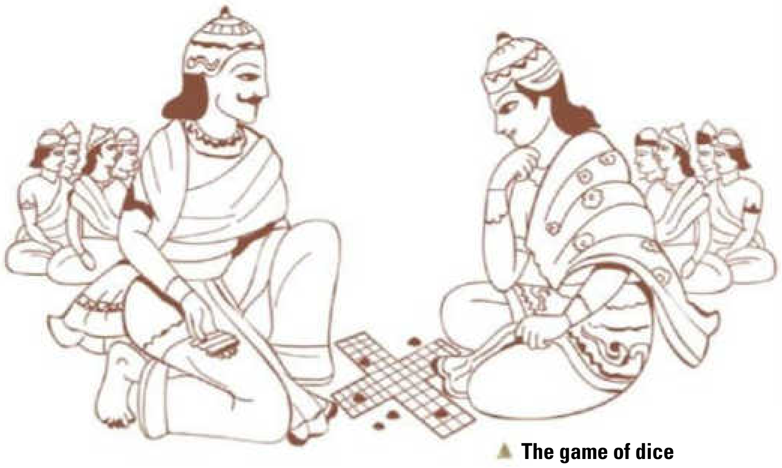
The great battle took place at Kurukshetra. The Kauravas were led by Bhishma, the great-uncle of both the Pandavas and Kauravas. Duryodhana fought with Karna by his side. A great warrior and a dear friend of Duryodhana, he posed a serious threat to the Pandavas. After a prolonged battle, the Pandavas emerged victorious with Krishna's help, and Yudhishthira became the king. Afterwards, the Pandavas, anguished by the carnage of the battle, went on a pilgrimage with Draupadi (*see opposite*) to the Himalayas, leaving Arjuna's grandson, Parikshit, as the ruler of Hastinapura. The journey was long and arduous, and one by one they died, until only Yudhishthira was left. Finally, he too died, and went to heaven, where he was reunited with his family.

KEY CHARACTERS

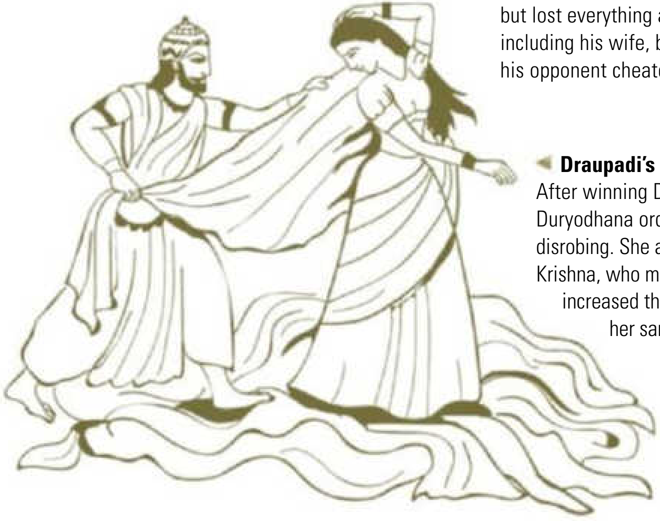
The *Mahabharata* has a vast array of characters. Many are warriors, such as Arjuna, the great archer, and his son, Abhimanyu; Bhishma, the leader of the Kaurava army; and Drona, a master archer who taught both the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Some are renowned for their strength, like Bhima, Yudhishthira's second brother, and Duryodhana. Yudhishthira himself is famed for his wisdom and love for truthfulness. Foremost among the female characters is Draupadi, the spirited daughter of King Drupada, who was won by Arjuna, but became the wife of all the five Pandavas. She is rightfully outraged at being used as a pawn in the dice game. After winning her, Duryodhana makes his brother disrobe her publicly. Draupadi's humiliation in this manner is partly responsible for the war.



Arjuna
Arjuna was a skilled archer. He won Draupadi in a contest held by her father, by shooting a fish hung from a revolving wheel just by seeing its reflection.



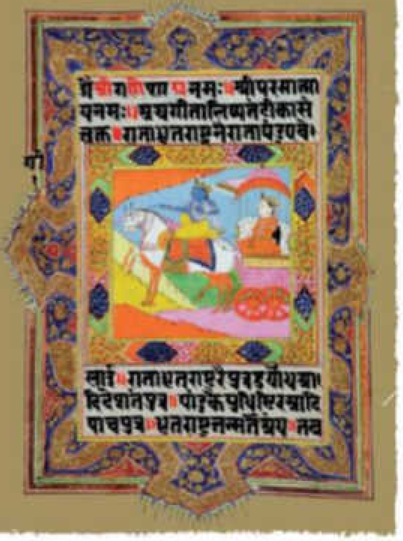
The game of dice
Yudhishthira was challenged to a game of dice by Duryodhana, but lost everything at stake, including his wife, because his opponent cheated.



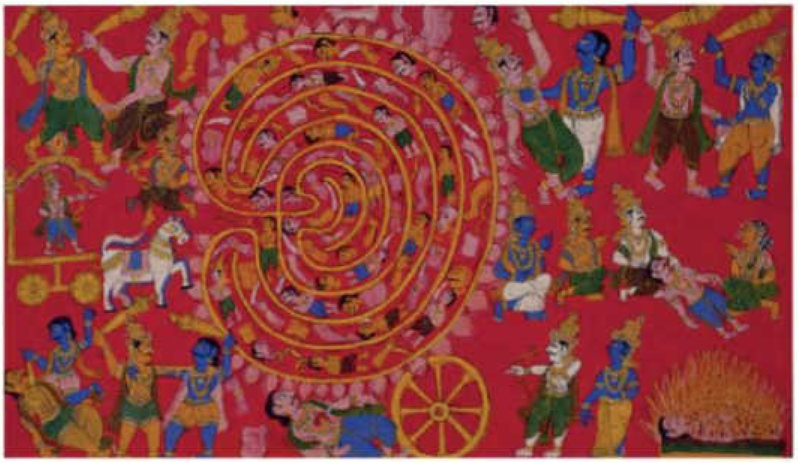
Draupadi's disrobing
After winning Draupadi, Duryodhana ordered her disrobing. She appealed to Krishna, who miraculously increased the length of her sari indefinitely.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA

When Arjuna saw his kinsmen arrayed on the opposing side before the war began, he was horrified at the idea of fighting them. He told Krishna he would not participate in the war. In the ensuing conversation that came to be known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna explained the concept of *dharma*, the correct moral path set down for each individual, helping Arjuna understand that as a warrior, he had to perform his duty without regard to reward or consequences. Krishna's explanation of *dharma* has become a classic text of Hindu philosophy.



Verses from the *Bhagavad Gita*



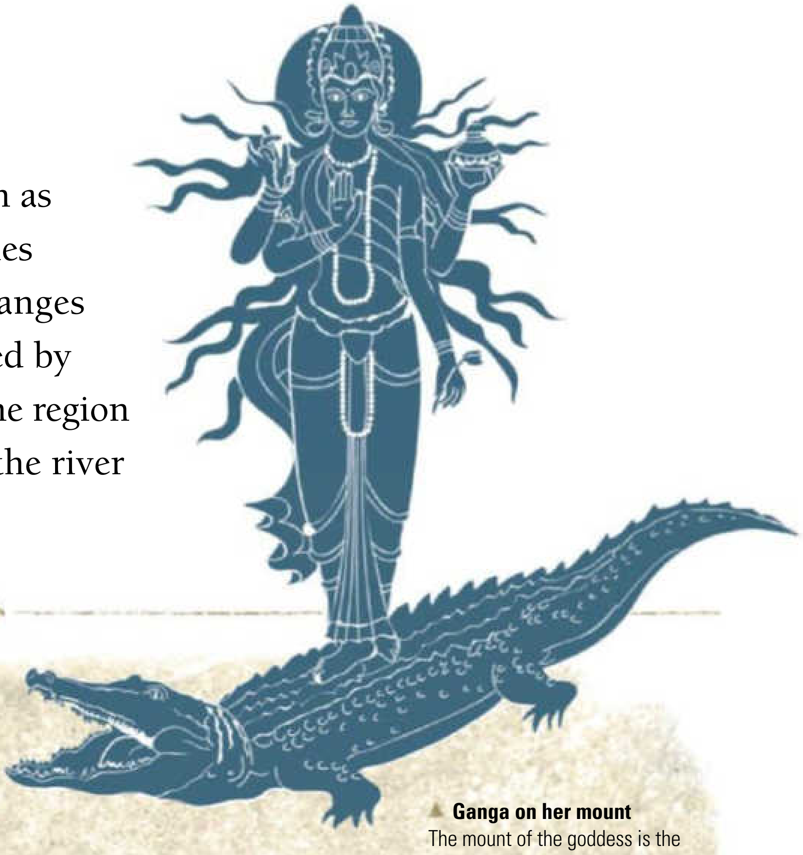
Abhimanyu trapped in battle
Arjuna's son, Abhimanyu, knew how to break into a spiral battle formation used by the Kauravas, but did not know the way out. He bravely led the way in and fought single-handed, but was finally outnumbered and killed.

THE BATTLE OF KURUKSHETRA

A vast plain near modern-day Delhi, Kurukshetra is believed to be the site of the epic conflict of the *Mahabharata*. The battle lasted for 18 days, and the poem narrates how huge armies came from places far and near to ally with either side. The epic describes the great war in detail: complex strategies were employed, and while common soldiers fought en masse, renowned warriors on either side sought to challenge each other in single combat, using weapons ranging from bows and maces to spears and swords. Veterans like Bhishma and Drona were forced to confront their own pupils, the Pandavas, because they were duty-bound to fight for the Kaurava side, although their sympathy lay with the wronged Pandavas. Countless warriors from both sides were killed.

THE ORIGIN OF THE GANGES

The Ganges (Ganga) is sacred in Hinduism both as a river and as the goddess Ganga, who personifies its waters. According to a popular myth, the Ganges originally flowed in heaven, before being allowed by the gods to descend to Earth and flow through the region that became India. Devout Hindus believe that the river has the property of washing away all sins.



▲ **Ganga on her mount**
The mount of the goddess is the Makara, which has the body of a crocodile and is sometimes shown with the tail of a fish.

THE MYTH

The kingdom of Ayodhya was once ruled by a king named Sagara who had 60,000 sons. One day, the king decided to perform the *Ashwamedha yagna* (horse sacrifice ceremony), to symbolize his supremacy over other rulers. The ritual involved sending his best stallion around the Earth. Anyone who wished to challenge the king's authority could stop the horse and fight the king. When the god Indra saw Sagara's stallion roaming around unchallenged, he hid it in the hermitage of the sage Kapila.

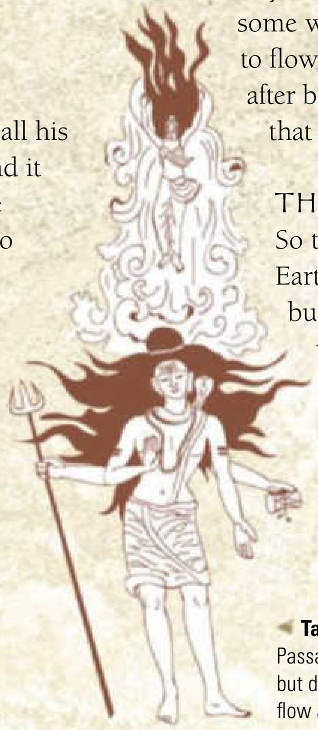
THE LOSS OF SAGARA'S SONS

Anxious to retrieve his stallion, the king told all his sons to look for the missing horse. They found it in Kapila's hermitage. Thinking him to be the thief, the young and arrogant princes began to insult him. Infuriated, the sage turned them to ashes with a single glance. Sagara pleaded with Kapila to liberate the souls of his sons, but the sage replied that they could be liberated only if the Ganges, a sacred river that flowed in heaven, came down to Earth and flowed over their ashes.

Many years later, King Bhagiratha, a descendant of Sagara, was granted a favour by the gods Brahma and Shiva.He asked for the Ganges to be allowed to descend to Earth for the salvation of his ancestors. The gods readily agreed, but they told him that the river was extremely strong and flowed very swiftly, unlike any earthly river. It would cause terrible destruction if it were allowed to flow freely. The waters of the Ganges had to be contained in some way. Finally, Shiva agreed to allow the sacred river to flow through his matted hair. He told Bhagiratha that after breaking the fall of the mighty river, he would ensure that it followed whichever course Bhagiratha took.

THE WATERS OF THE GANGES

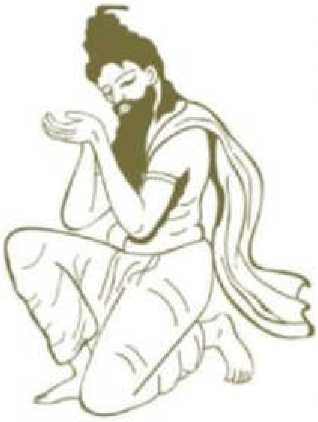
So the raging waters of the river cascaded down to Earth, bringing life to the lands over which it flowed, but without causing any destructive floods. The place where the Ganges first touched the Earth came to be known as Gangotri. The river flowed over the ashes of Sagara's many sons, liberating their souls, which then rose to heaven. Ever since, devotees have believed that the waters of the Ganges wash away past sins, and dying people are given a sip of the holy water so that their souls achieve salvation.



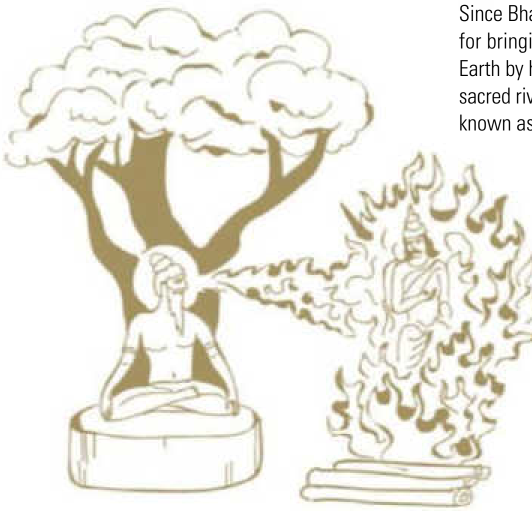
◀ **Taming the Ganges**
Passage through Shiva's hair tamed the life-giving but dangerous waters of the Ganges by slowing its flow and splitting the river into separate channels.

KEY CHARACTERS

The main characters in the story of the origin of the Ganges, besides Sagara, are Kapila and Bhagiratha; both were wise and devoted to *dharma* (moral duty). Kapila's power came from his reverence for Vishnu and his knowledge of yogic philosophy. Bhagiratha's kingdom was beset by natural disasters, so he went to the Himalayas and did penance to absolve the sins of his predecessors.



▲ **Bhagiratha**
Since Bhagiratha was responsible for bringing the River Ganges to Earth by his austere penance, the sacred river was also popularly known as the Bhagirathi.



◄ **Kapila's fury**
After the sage burned Sagara's sons to ashes, he told the king that their souls would be denied salvation until the River Ganges cleansed them.

THE GODDESS GANGA

The River Ganges is worshipped as the goddess Ganga, a daughter of Himavat (meaning "snow-clad"), the personification of the Himalayas. According to a myth, the goddess agreed to marry King Shantanu provided he did not question any of her actions. They had seven children, but she drowned each of them in her waters as soon as they were born. When the distraught king asked her the reason, she said she was destined to give birth to divine beings called *vasus*, who were doomed to be born as humans. By casting them into her waters, she had released them from this curse.

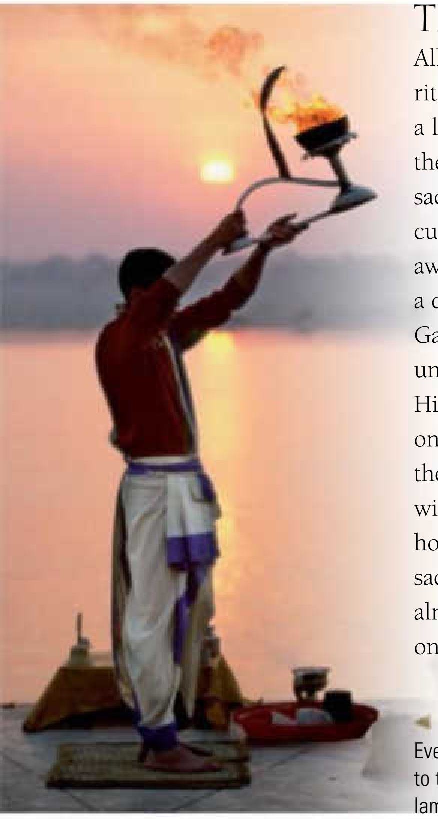
Ganga, the river goddess

▲ **The Himalayas**
The Ganges originates from the Gangotri glacier in the Himalayas. These mountains are also the source of the rivers Brahmaputra and Yamuna.

◆

THE SACRED RIVER

All rivers are sacred in Hinduism, and ritual purification by river water has a long history in southern Asia. But the waters of the Ganges are especially sacred and are believed to be a powerful curative. Bathing in the Ganges washes away all the past sins of a person. And if a dead person's ashes are immersed in the Ganges, their soul is freed from the unending cycle of death and rebirth. Many Hindus aim to bathe in the Ganges at least once in their lifetime and hope that after they die and are cremated, their relatives will be able to scatter their ashes in the holy river. Charity is considered another sacred duty of Hindus, so pilgrims give alms to the sages and poor people living on the banks of the river.



◄ **Prayer ceremony**
Every day at sundown, devotees pay homage to the River Ganges with flowers, lighted lamps, and the chanting of mantras.

WORSHIPPING THE GODDESS

Pilgrims visit the Ganges in thousands, especially in the holy cities such as Rishikesh, Haridwar, Allahabad, and Varanasi, which stand on its banks. Devotees throng these places during major festivals such as the Kumbh Mela, when some of the world's largest gatherings of people are seen. Ritual sacrifices are made to the Ganges and offerings to the river goddess include flowers, fruits, and money.

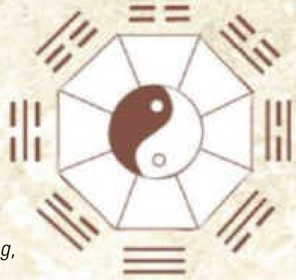
Devotees on the banks of the Ganges

LEGENDS OF THE CHINESE HEROES

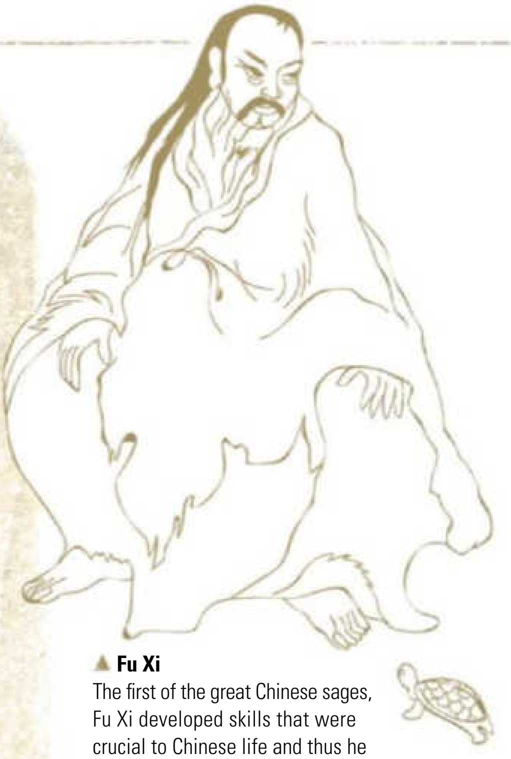
Chinese myths often feature culture heroes who teach the skills of survival and civilization to the people. Such heroes are portrayed as emperors – either mortal rulers, or deities who came from heaven to rule China. The origin of the Chinese script, and the art of making silk and weaving it into cloth – key features of China's culture – are explained in these myths. The stories also stress the need for wise and just rulers, showing that a good government is sometimes even more important than the reputation of the imperial family.

THE FOUNDER OF CHINA

Fu Xi was married to the goddess Nü Wa. He was said to have come to Earth in prehistoric times to become the first emperor of China. Some believed that he had four faces, each overseeing one of the four points of the compass. More importantly, he was one of the foremost culture heroes of China. The invention of clan and family names, and the establishment of social order were attributed to Fu Xi. Some said he also taught the people of China how to domesticate animals, catch fish with nets, and make music with instruments. In addition, Fu Xi showed the Chinese how to make silk thread and weave it into cloth, how to measure time, and how to use a calendar made from a length of knotted cord.



► **I Ching**
Fu Xi is believed to have invented the Chinese script and the trigrams of the *I Ching*, a series of symbols used to predict the future.



▲ **Fu Xi**
The first of the great Chinese sages, Fu Xi developed skills that were crucial to Chinese life and thus he is often called the Founder of China.

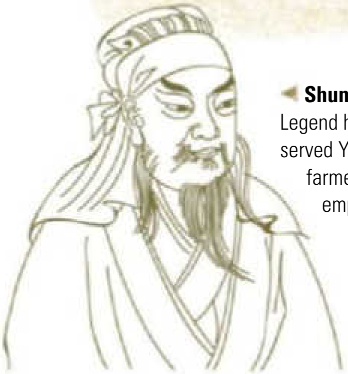
Yangtze River

THE LAND OF CHINA

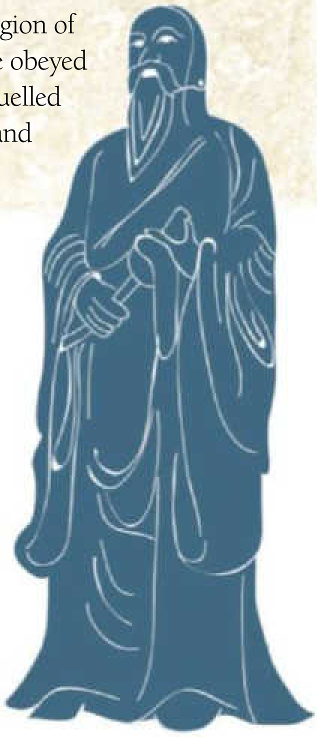
China is a huge country with major variations in climate, and landscapes ranging from high mountain ranges to vast plains. Large areas of the country are dominated by great rivers such as the Yellow River and the Yangtze, which link the different regions of China and unify the country. Important as arteries for transportation and sources of fish for food, these rivers can be dangerous during floods – although the silt from the floods helps farmers by making the land on the banks more fertile. So powerful are the rivers that the ancient Chinese writers often depicted them as mythical beings – generally dragons – and only the most powerful deities or rulers could tame their floods.

TWO SAGE RULERS

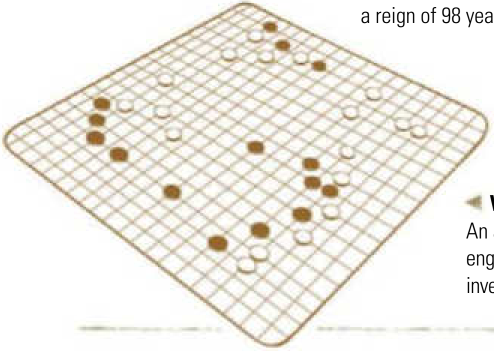
A mythical emperor renowned both for his wisdom and skill in arms, Yao ruled over vast territories and brought peace to southern China. He had nine sons, but considered none of them capable of ruling. With the help of the gods, he found a simple farmer called Shun, who was more skilled and intelligent than Yao's sons, and bequeathed his throne to him. Shun became the second sage ruler. Governing astutely, he visited every region of his kingdom to ensure that the people obeyed him and had what they needed. He quelled rebellions south of the Yangtze River and lived to be 100 years old.



Shun
Legend has it that Shun served Yao for 28 years as a farmer before becoming emperor himself.



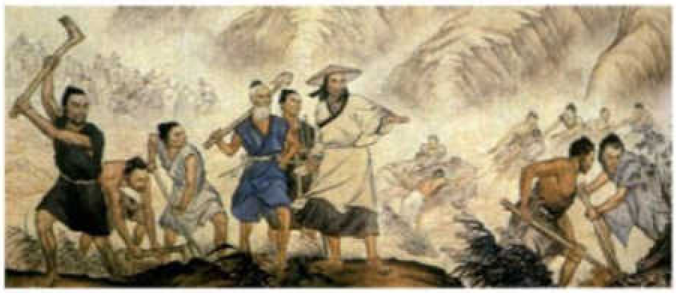
Yao
Known as the Lord of the Golden Age, Yao was an ideal ruler who enjoyed a reign of 98 years.



Weiqi
An ancient board game, in which two armies engage in battle, Weiqi, or Go, was said to be invented by Yao, who saw the game in a dream.

THE QUELLING OF THE FLOOD

Shun was gravely troubled by a great flood of China's rivers. The emperor of heaven had sent the flood because he was angry with the sinful ways of humanity. Gun, the grandson of the emperor, took pity on humans and went down to the Earth to build canals and drainage ditches. When the emperor of heaven found out what Gun had done without his permission, he killed his grandson. But as Gun lay dead, a dragon called Yu emerged from his body, saw the terrible damage inflicted by the raging waters, and flew to heaven to intercede on behalf of the people of China. Upon hearing Yu's story, the emperor of heaven relented, and allowed Yu to raise mountains, reroute rivers, and build drainage channels so that the floods could be controlled at last.

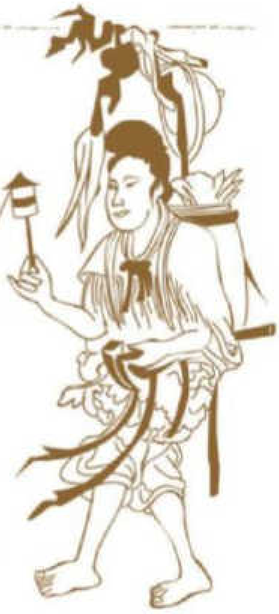


Controlling the flood
China's long history of trying to control the floods of its major rivers is reflected in its myths. Using large labour forces the Chinese have raised banks and created dams to stem the floods.

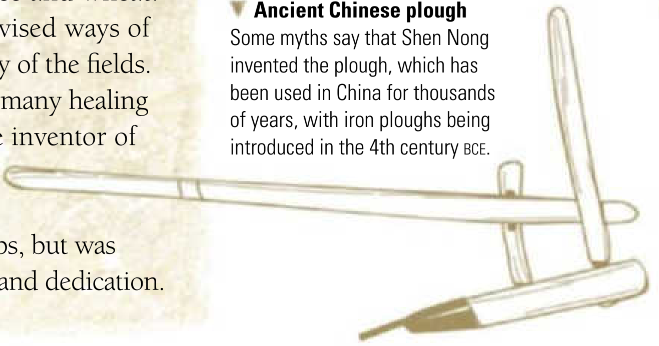
THE INVENTOR OF FARMING

Another culture hero, Shen Nong, invented the art of farming. A fertility god who helped plants grow, Shen Nong taught the Chinese how to grow staple foods such as rice and wheat. Some say that he invented the plough and devised ways of growing crops in rotation to preserve the fertility of the fields. Shen Nong is also attributed with revealing the many healing properties of herbs, and is thus revered as the inventor of Chinese traditional medicine. Originally a mortal, Shen Nong was a herbalist who poisoned himself while experimenting with herbs, but was granted immortality by the gods for his bravery and dedication.

Shen Nong
The great Shen Nong was both an inventor of farming implements and a pioneer herbalist who was very much in tune with the environment.

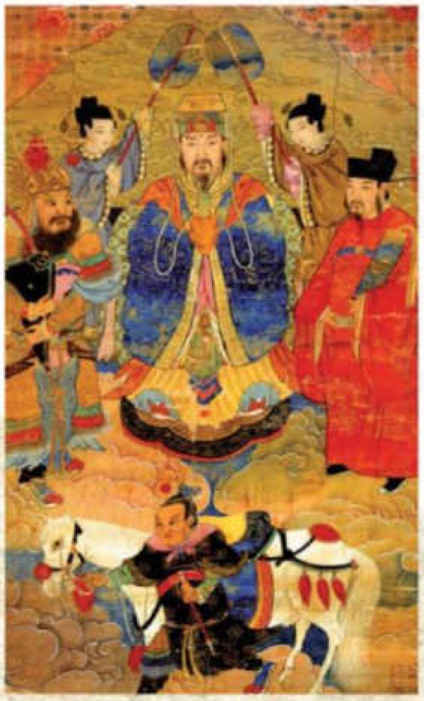


Ancient Chinese plough
Some myths say that Shen Nong invented the plough, which has been used in China for thousands of years, with iron ploughs being introduced in the 4th century BCE.



THE COURT OF THE JADE EMPEROR

According to Daoist myths, the vast and complex court of the Chinese emperor was mirrored in a celestial court of immortals who served his heavenly counterpart, the Jade Emperor. Even the deities of other religions such as Buddhism were seen as a part of this huge organization of gods and goddesses. By making offerings, believers sought the blessings and help of these deities.



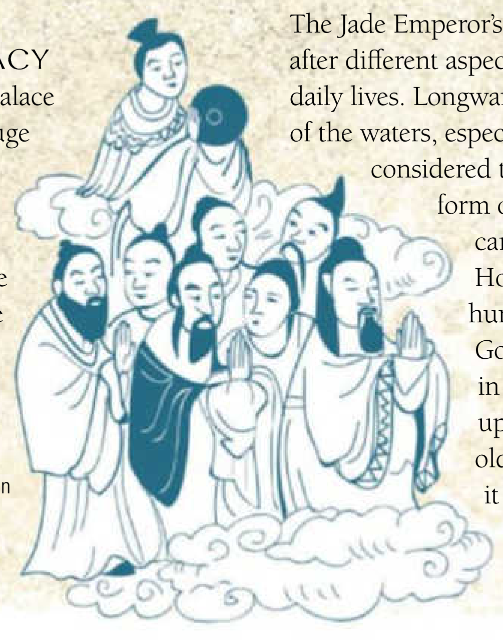
Yühuang
The Jade Emperor is usually portrayed as a bearded man wearing the regalia of a mortal emperor, and clasping to his chest a tablet of jade.

THE MYTH

The emperor of heaven was popularly known as Yühuang (the Jade Emperor) but was also often referred to as Shang Di (Lord of Heaven). He was a supreme deity but, like Confucius, he was originally a mortal. Yühuang was the child of a king, Ching Teh, and his queen, Pao Yüeh. For many years, the royal couple could not have children. Pao Yüeh asked the priests to pray for her to have a child and the next night she dreamed that Laoze, the deified father of Daoism, visited her carrying a baby. Soon after, she became pregnant. She gave birth to a son who grew up to be a kind and wise ruler, but after ensuring prosperity for his subjects, he left his throne to follow a life of prayer and meditation. When his perfect life was over, he was deified as the Jade Emperor and became the ruler of the immortals.

THE CELESTIAL BUREAUCRACY

The Jade Emperor lived in a celestial palace and ruled heaven with the help of a huge retinue of other deities, each of whom controlled a particular department of the heavenly civil service. This was a vast bureaucracy that resembled in size and complexity the organization of the civil service that worked for the Chinese emperor on Earth.



The immortals
Many ministers and judges assisted the Jade Emperor in the day-to-day running of the heavenly court. Devotees of Chinese popular religion placed statues of these immortals in temples and made offerings to them.

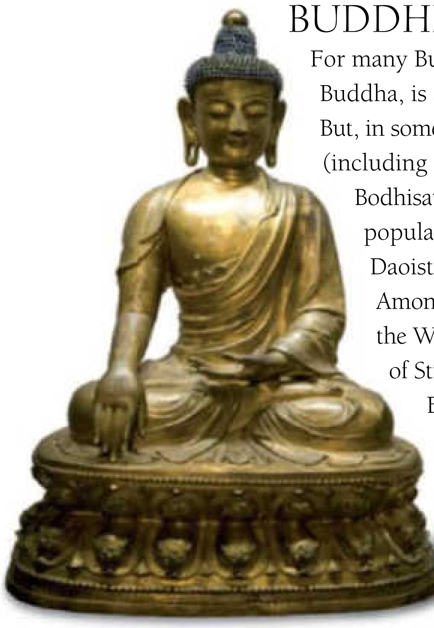
At the emperor's side sat Xi Wangmu (Queen Mother of the West), the empress of heaven. A powerful goddess, she had her own palace, built of gold and surrounded by a garden with trees that bore the magical Peaches of Immortality. The fruit took a thousand years to ripen, but when they were ready to eat, they gave eternal life to the eater.

PROTECTORS OF CHINA

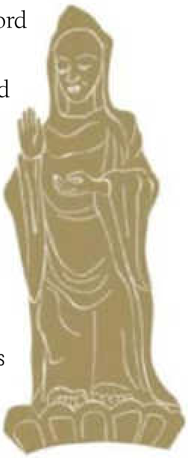
The Jade Emperor's court included many gods who looked after different aspects of life on Earth, helping people in their daily lives. Longwang, known as the dragon king, took care of the waters, especially the seas and rivers, and was also considered to be the god of rain. Yue Lao took the form of an old man who lived on the moon, and cared for couples when they got married. However, the most important god to humans was Zao Jun, known as the Kitchen God. People kept his image above the stove in their kitchen. Every year they would put up a new picture of the god and burn the old one. As the smoke rose heavenwards, it took a message to the Jade Emperor, reporting how the members of the household had behaved during the year.

BUDDHIST IMMORTALS

For many Buddhists, the spiritual leader of their faith, the Buddha, is seen as a great human teacher, not as a god. But, in some forms of Buddhism, a multitude of figures (including the Buddha himself, and other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas) attract devotion and worship. In Chinese popular religion, these figures join the ranks of the Daoist immortals and are worshipped in temples. Among the most popular are: Omitofu, Buddha of the Western Paradise; Da Shi Zhi, the Lord of Strength and Success; Mile Fu, the Buddha of the Future; Pilu, the god of wisdom and embodiment of Buddhist law; and Guan Yin, the goddess of mercy.



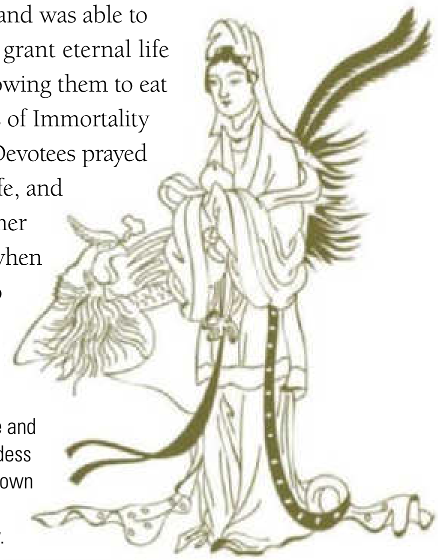
▲ **The Buddha**
A prince who renounced the world to achieve ultimate wisdom, the Buddha is revered by the Chinese as one of the greatest of all spiritual teachers.



► **Guan Yin**
The goddess Guan Yin is known as the one who watches and listens. She responds whenever her devotees call upon her for help.

THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN

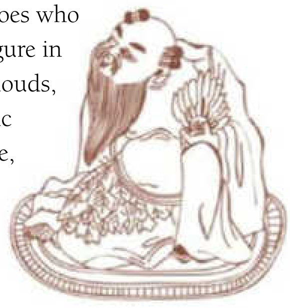
Known as the Golden Mother or the Queen Mother of the West, Xi Wangmu was one of the most powerful immortals. She heard the reports of the other immortals after they returned from visits to Earth. She ruled the mortal world too, and was able to bring death, or to grant eternal life to a person by allowing them to eat one of the Peaches of Immortality from her garden. Devotees prayed to her for a long life, and women called on her for good fortune when they were about to be married.



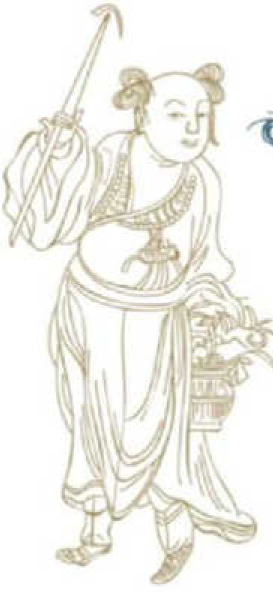
► **Xi Wangmu**
As the controller of life and death, the mother goddess Xi Wangmu is often shown holding one of the Peaches of Immortality.

THE EIGHT IMMORTALS

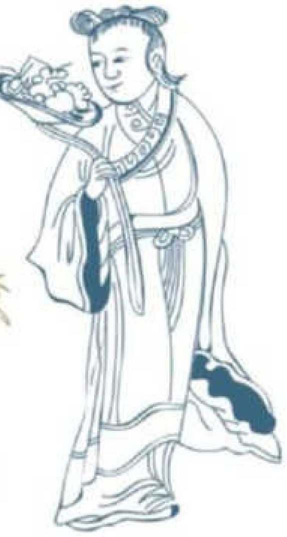
The Ba Xian, or Eight Immortals, were Daoist scholars and heroes who achieved immortality due to their devotion to Daoism. They figure in numerous myths along with the Jade Emperor, flying across clouds, fighting dragon kings, or defeating evildoers, and also in comic adventures, such as getting drunk, or setting fire to the sea. Some, like Han Hsiang Tzun, whose flute was said to give life, were patrons to musicians; some helped the sick, like Ho Hsien Ku, a female immortal who carried objects associated with immortality in her ladle. Chung Li Chuan's fan could revive the dead, and Chang Kuo's castanets prolonged life.



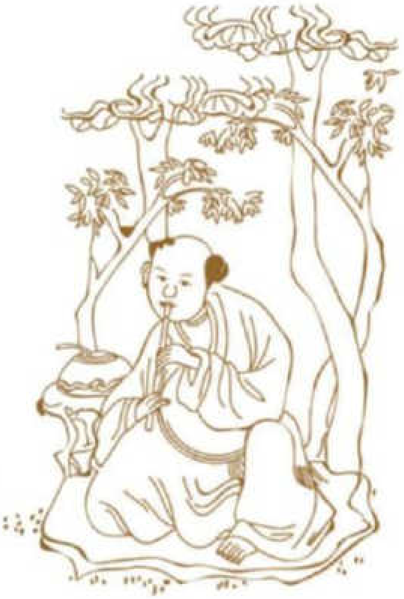
Chung Li Chuan



Chang Kuo



Ho Hsien Ku



Han Hsiang Tzun

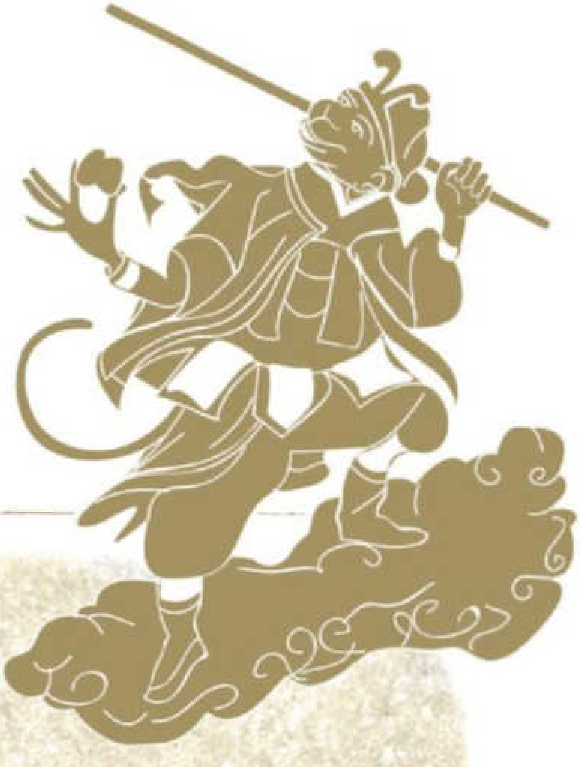
THE IMPERIAL COURT

China had one of the largest and most complex systems of government in the ancient world. Hundreds of officials, each with a clearly defined job, worked for the emperor, and these people were chosen by a competitive examination system. There was a rigorous hierarchy, with only key advisers allowed direct access to the emperor, who would meet them, as well as foreign officials, in one of the audience halls in his palace. In Chinese mythology, a similar government existed in heaven.

Audience hall in the Forbidden City, Beijing

THE ADVENTURES OF MONKEY

One of the best-loved of all Chinese myths is the story of a mischievous character named Monkey. It tells how Monkey runs amok, upsetting all the gods, and causes still more mischief when he is punished. Finally, he is made to join a Buddhist pilgrim on an expedition and reforms himself. Involving Daoist, Buddhist, and ancient Chinese deities, the story appeals to all with its lively plot and likeable, albeit roguish, central figure.



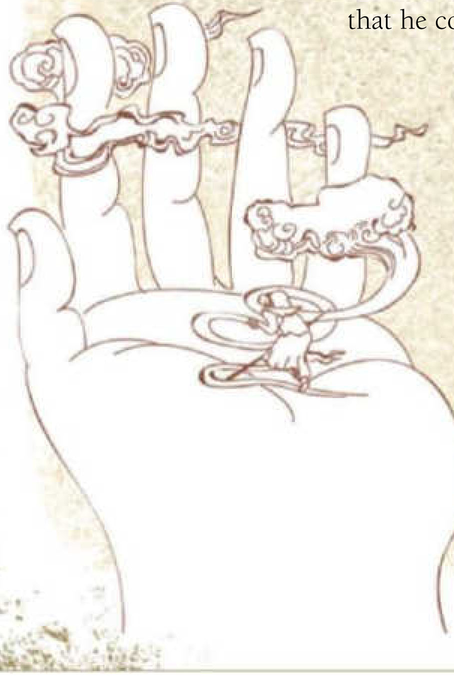
► **The monkey king**
Monkey's desire for immortality at all costs is comic, but also a reflection of a common human trait.

THE MYTH

Monkey was the most intelligent of all his species. When he was young he went to study with a Daoist master, but unable to resist playing pranks on other students, he was sent to the forest. There the other monkeys revered him for his wisdom and skill and made him their king. A feast was held for him, and Monkey, having drunk too much, fell asleep, whereupon the King of the Underworld kidnapped him and took him to hell. There Monkey was confined to keep him out of mischief.

FROM HELL TO HEAVEN

In hell, Monkey broke free and went to look at the register of judgements, which contained the destiny of every living being. When he read that he would die when he was 342 years old, he crossed out his name so that he could live for ever. When the Jade Emperor was told about Monkey's impudent behaviour, he decided to summon the irrepressible creature to heaven. He tried to keep him in check by giving him the vital responsibility of looking after the heavenly peach garden, where the Peaches of Immortality grew. Monkey was very happy in heaven until the gods threw a party for Xi Wangmu. They forgot to invite Monkey, and in revenge, he stole and ate all the Peaches of Immortality, reaffirming that he was now actually one of the immortals.



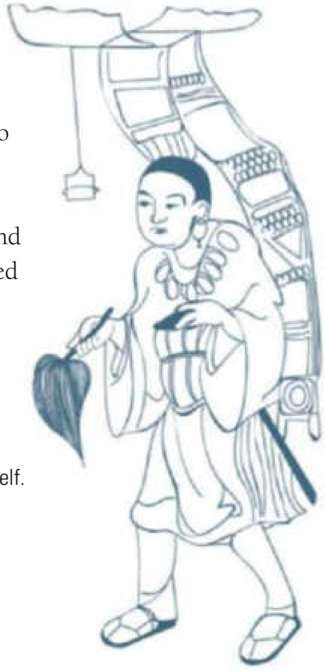
◄ **In the Buddha's palm**
After Monkey discovered that he had merely traversed the breadth of the Buddha's palm, he realized that his powers were, after all, limited.

MONKEY AND THE BUDDHA

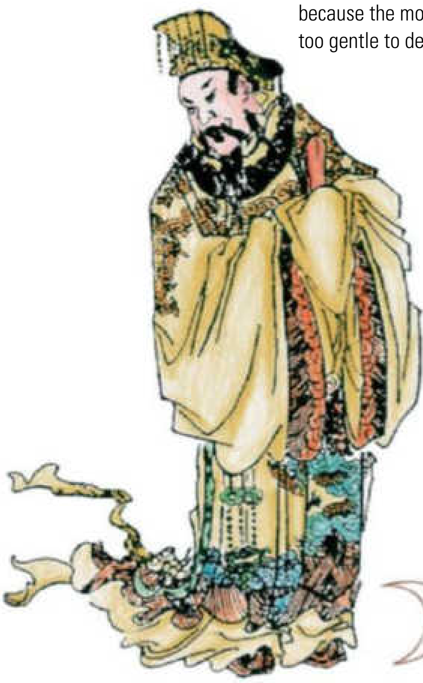
After he had stolen the peaches, Monkey ate some pills belonging to the sage Laoze that were made from the Peaches of Immortality. Assured for a third time of eternal life, he began to plan to take over heaven. The baffled emperor appealed to the Buddha, the greatest sage of all. When the Buddha asked Monkey why he wanted to rule heaven, he replied that he deserved to be king as he was the most powerful creature in the universe, and could leap thousands of miles in one jump. Holding Monkey in his hand, the Buddha asked him to demonstrate his power. But when Monkey obliged, the Buddha showed him that he had only jumped across the sage's enormous palm – the mountains where he had landed were the Buddha's fingers. The astounded Monkey was imprisoned inside a magic mountain, and was released when he had truly repented. He was ordered to accompany the monk Xuanzang, who was going on a westward journey to India to find Buddhist scriptures and bring them back to China.

MONKEY'S JOURNEY

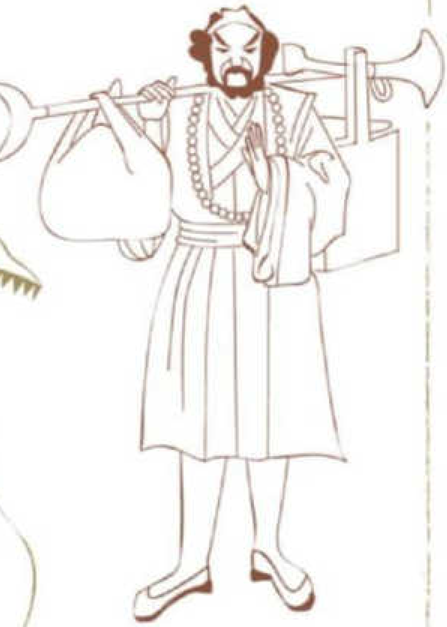
The most popular aspects of Monkey's story deal with episodes of his mischief-making, and his meeting with the Buddha. But the tale concludes with his journey to India with Xuanzang and his disciples, Zhu Wuneng (also known as Pigsy) and Sha Wujing. They travel through an imaginary landscape populated by dragons, demons, volcanoes, and other dangers, and Xuanzang's companions do their best to protect him so that he can fulfil his quest for the scriptures. In the end they return to China, and Monkey and Xuanzang are rewarded by being bestowed with the status of Buddhas.



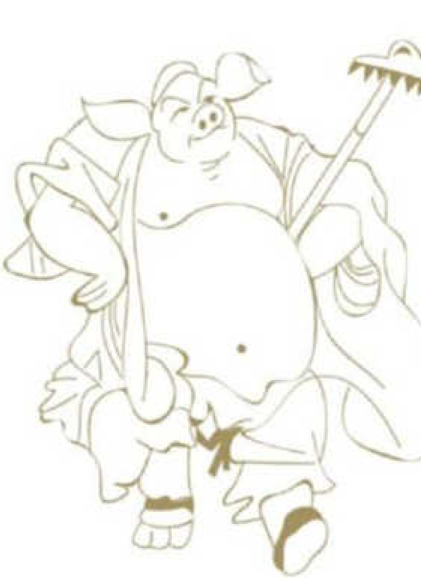
► **Xuanzang**
The Buddha told Monkey to accompany Xuanzang because the monk was too gentle to defend himself.



◄ **The Jade Emperor**
The emperor of heaven found Monkey hard to deal with, and happily complied with the Buddha's solution to send him with Xuanzang.



▼ **Sha Wujing**
Sha was a powerful heavenly general who was exiled to Earth because he broke a goblet in the peach garden.



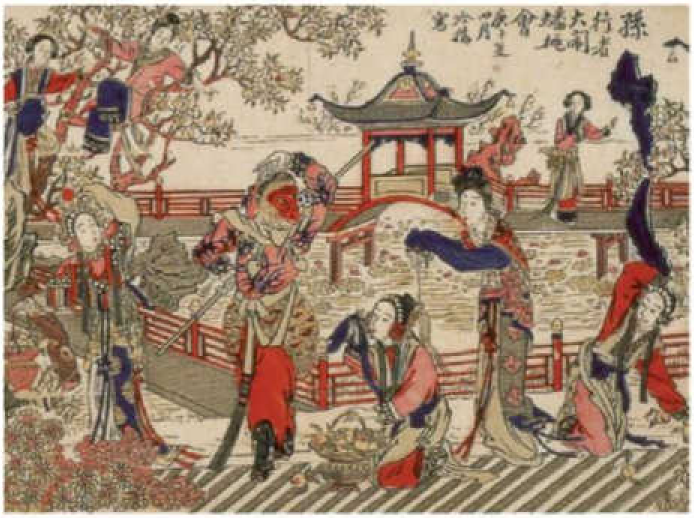
◄ **Zhu Wuneng**
A heavenly marshal, Zhu was banished to Earth in the form of a pig because he got drunk and flirted with the moon goddess.

THE HEAVENLY PEACH GARDEN

The heavenly garden, where the Peaches of Immortality grew, belonged to Xi Wangmu (Queen Mother of the West). It was a place of great beauty but also power, because eating the fruit made a person immortal. Monkey abused his position in the garden by eating the peaches, which were not only powerful, but very scarce, because the trees rarely bore fruit. Moreover, Xi Wangmu's banquet was held only once every 3,000 years. Eating the peaches was just one of the three ways in which Monkey made himself immortal – each time he was challenging the power of the deities to confer immortality upon him.

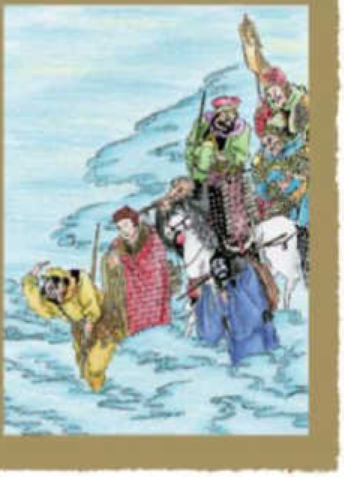
Peaches

▼ **The paradise garden**
Chinese painters depicted the heavenly peach garden as an elegant Chinese garden, crossed with streams and featuring pavilions where one could rest.



THE NOVEL

The story of Monkey is told in a long novel, known outside China as *The Journey to the West*. Published anonymously in 1590, it was probably written by a scholar called Wu Chengen (1506–82). It has always been a popular tale, even in translation, because readers can appreciate it on several levels – as an adventure story starring the colourful Monkey; as a religious narrative about the Buddha and his scriptures; and as a comedy narrating how a subversive character defies imperial power.

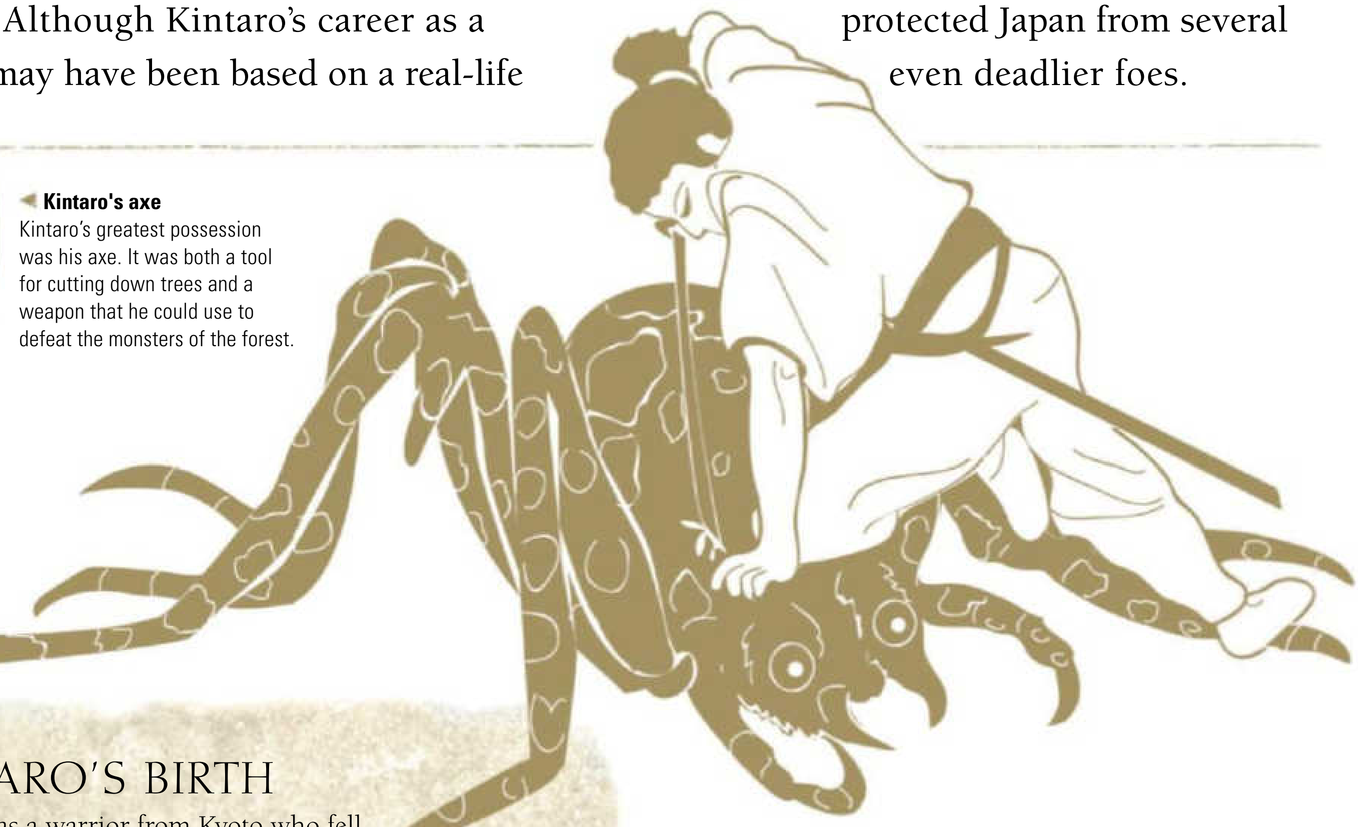


The Journey to the West

KINTARO

One of the most popular stories in Japanese mythology is not about the many great gods of the Shinto hierarchy, but about a superhero called Kintaro (Golden Boy), who possessed superhuman strength even as a child, and grew up to become a heroic samurai. Although Kintaro's career as a samurai may have been based on a real-life figure – the great warrior Sakata no Kintoki – he is essentially a figure of legend. Brought up in the forest, he became both a friend to the animals and a defender of the forest people against monsters when still young. Later on, in his exploits as a samurai, he protected Japan from several even deadlier foes.

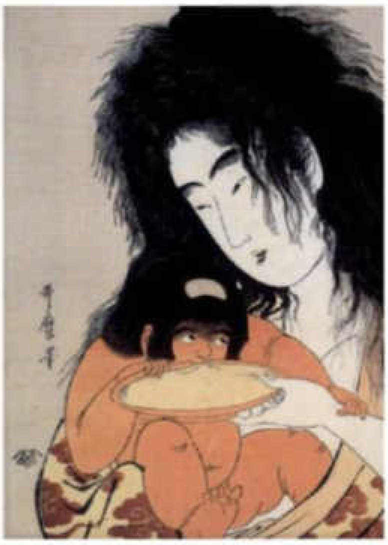
Kintaro's axe
Kintaro's greatest possession was his axe. It was both a tool for cutting down trees and a weapon that he could use to defeat the monsters of the forest.



Killing the giant spider
The Tsuchigumo (earth-spider) slain by Kintaro features as a monster in several other Japanese legends. The spider generally poisoned its victims to death or trapped them in a vast, net-like web.

KINTARO'S BIRTH

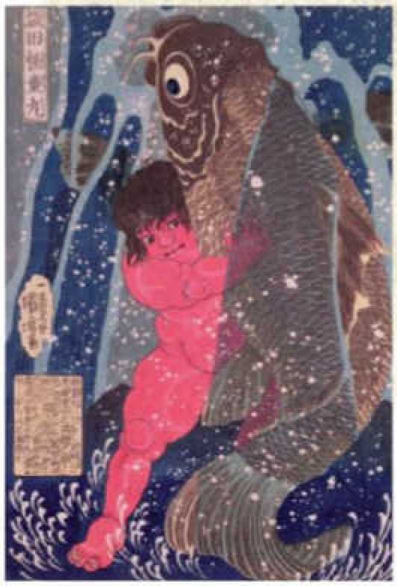
Kintoki was a warrior from Kyoto who fell in love with a beautiful young woman and married her. Soon afterwards, he became involved in a court intrigue and was banished to the forest, because of some malicious gossip that had been spread about him by certain courtiers jealous of his power. He died soon after arriving in the forest, where his wife give birth to a son. When the boy was born, his mother named him Kintaro. Even as a baby, Kintaro was prodigiously strong; by the time he was eight years old he could cut down trees as easily and as well as the most experienced of woodcutters, and he came to be valued highly by the people of the forest. Once Kintaro became accustomed to the ways of the wild, he protected his mother and the other forest dwellers from many monsters, including terrifying beasts such as the giant earth-spider.



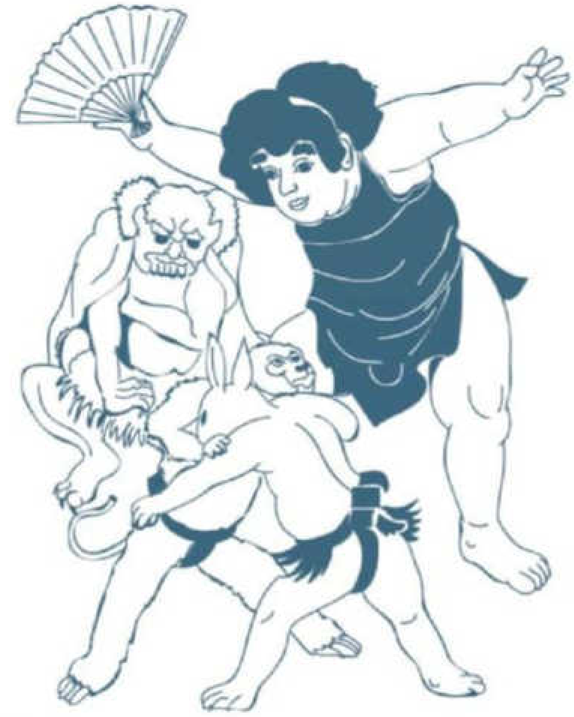
Yama Uba and Kintaro
In several Japanese legends, Yama Uba is a spirit of the forest who looks like a human and lives in an isolated hut. In some versions of the Kintaro story, she takes the form of a young woman and is the hero's mother.

ANIMALS AS FRIENDS

Growing up without other children for company, Kintaro became friendly with the animals of the forest, especially the bear, deer, monkey, and hare. One day, a sumo wrestling match was organized in the forest, and Kintaro acted as the judge. The monkey wrestled with the hare and lost, but then complained that he had tripped, and so the pair fought again. This time the monkey won. On each occasion, Kintaro awarded a rice cake to the winner, so both were happy. It soon became clear that the bear was strongest of all the animals. But on the way home, Kintaro showed that he was stronger than the bear, when he pulled down a tree with his bare hands to build a bridge over a river for them to cross.



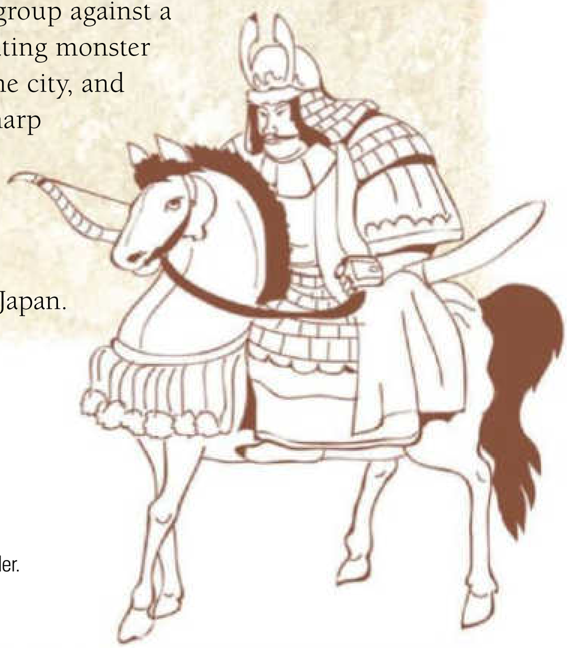
Wrestling the salmon
Kintaro was a skilled wrestler, and was as much at home in the water as on land. Among the creatures he wrestled were giant fish such as carp and salmon.



Judging the contest
Kintaro watched closely as the hare and the monkey wrestled, looking out for signs of cheating or false moves that might be made to beat or push an opponent out of the specified arena.

THE SAMURAI'S FOLLOWER

Kintaro was renowned for his superhuman strength. When he uprooted a tree to make a bridge, he was spotted by a man dressed as a woodcutter, who challenged the boy to an arm-wrestling contest. When Kintaro and the man proved equally matched, the stranger revealed himself to be Sadamitsu, a follower of a powerful lord called Raiko, who invited Kintaro to the capital to become a samurai. With his mother's permission, Kintaro departed, and after a period of service with Raiko, he was promoted to lead an elite quartet of Raiko's followers called the Four Braves. Kintaro led this group against a fearsome man-eating monster that preyed on the city, and used his razor-sharp sword to slice off the creature's head. Thus he became a famous hero throughout Japan.

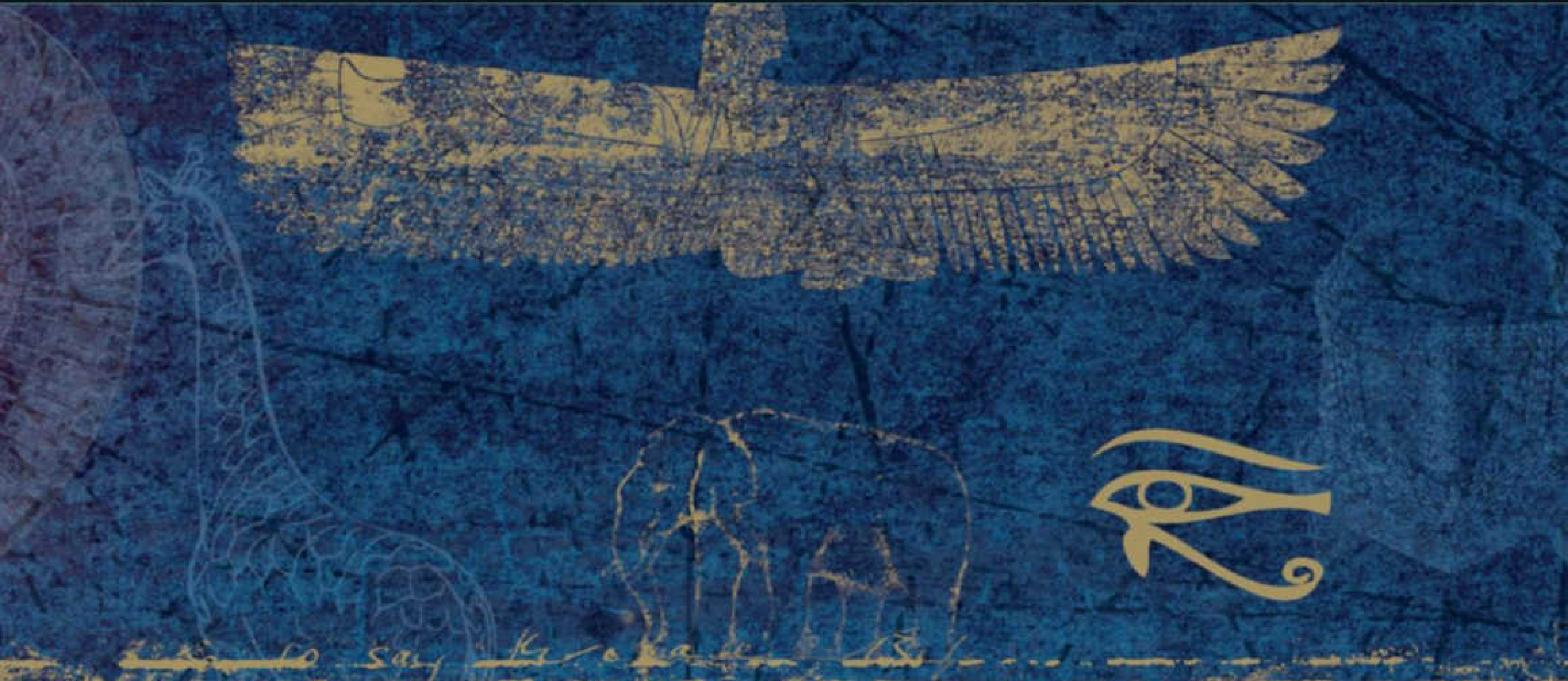


The samurai
The samurai were mounted warriors in feudal Japan. They were highly disciplined and skilled swordsmen who protected their patron and helped to enforce law and order.

KINTARO TODAY

Kintaro is a well-known character in Japan and is represented in various ways in modern popular culture. Parents who have a newborn boy place Kintaro dolls in the child's room, in the hope that the baby will become strong. The hero also features in television series and computer games, as well as in Japanese anime series and manga comic books. Other Japanese hero characters in similar publications share some of Kintaro's strength and characteristics, even if they do not share his name. Kintaro is also familiar through his own kind of sweet – a cylinder-shaped candy with his image on every slice.

Kintaro candy



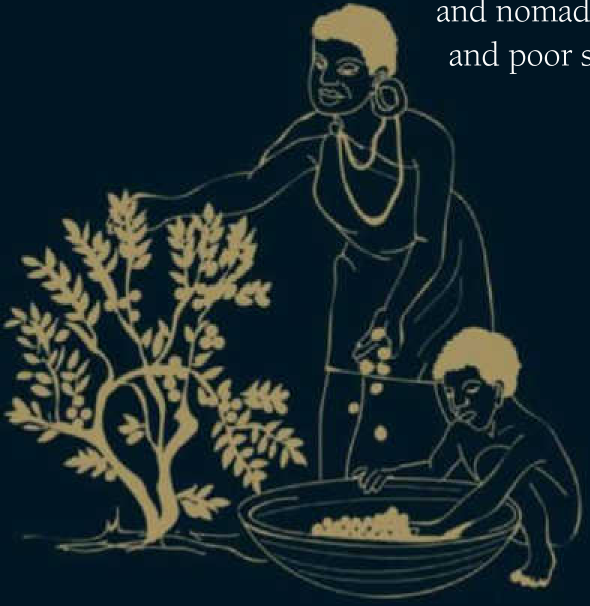
AFRICA

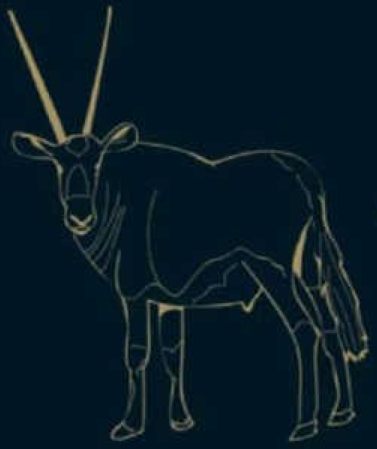
Africa is an immense landmass that stretches from the Mediterranean Sea, across the equator, to a point far to the south of the tropic of Capricorn. The vast continent's terrain embraces areas as varied as the humid rainforest of the Congo and the dry desert of the Sahara. The history of civilization in Africa has a huge span too, because our very earliest ancestors lived there – the story of humanity in Africa has lasted more than a million years.

As a result, Africa has produced a range of cultures as varied as any on Earth. It has been home to cattle herders like the Masai, hunters like the San, and tribes that spend their lives on the move in search of food. But it has also been the home of empires, from Benin to Egypt, that have settled, taken over large areas of the land, and prospered. Today, the differences between urban and rural, settled and nomadic, and rich and poor still remain, and are still enormous. All this makes it hard to generalize about African culture and mythology, as each tribe has its own unique traditions and stories, its particular ceremonies and rituals.

Written history came relatively late to Africa. With the exception of Egypt, where a literate civilization developed in c.3000 BCE and lasted for some 3,000 years, much African mythology has been handed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. This fact renders the mythology of Africa more elusive to outsiders. Writing stories down preserves their content and makes them accessible to readers beyond Africa, but it also takes them away from their important background of oral storytelling. This living context should always be imagined when we read African myths and legends.

Among these diverse mythologies there are a few common themes. One that stands out is the belief in a supreme god. Nearly all tribes, whatever additional deities or spirits form part of their mythology, respect a high god. This



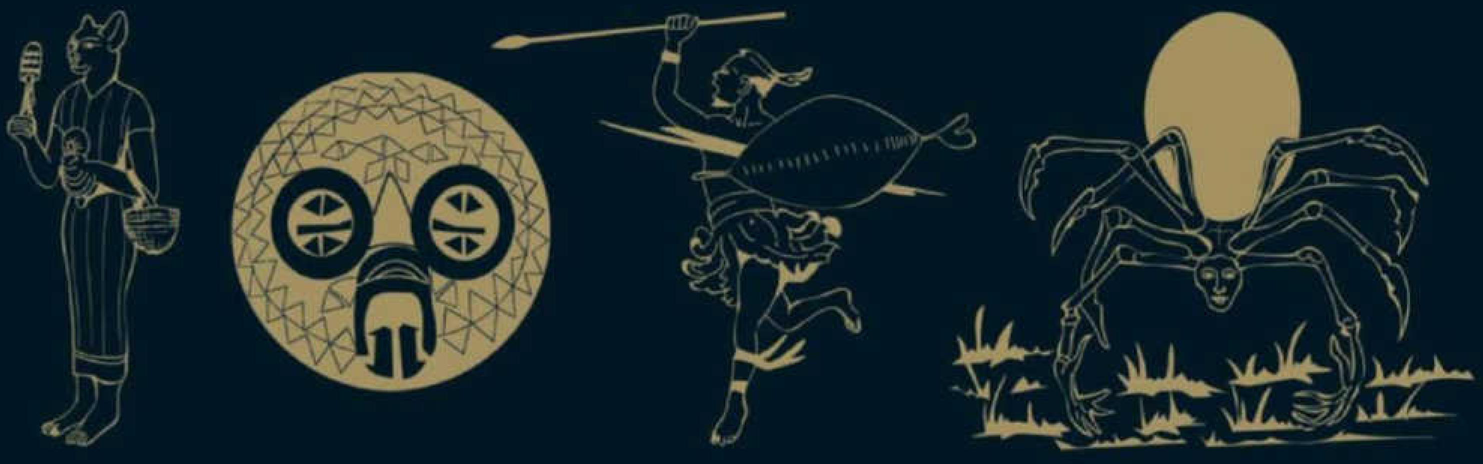


> THE COMPLETE COLLECTION OF ALL THE MYTHS OF THE AFRICAN PEOPLES WOULD FILL HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PAGES, EVEN WITH OUR INCOMPLETE KNOWLEDGE.
>
> Jan Knappert, *African Mythology*, 1990

deity may be regarded in different ways from one place to another – for some he is a creator, for some an ancestor (either a mother or a father), for some a figure like a tribal elder, for some a close companion. The existence of such a supreme deity can explain everything from the sound of thunder to the inevitability of death. For most tribes, his overriding qualities are his power and his omniscience – people speak of his ever-open eye, his knowledge of our every thought, and his surpassing wisdom.

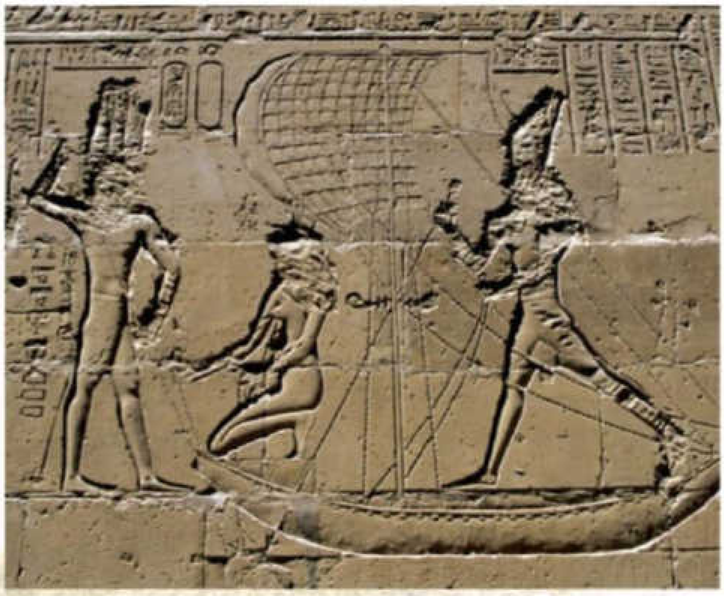
The high god and the gods that accompany him or her communicate with the people by way of ceremonies, and in many African tribes the central figure in such rituals is the shaman or medicine man. Because of his training, the shaman has the ability to communicate with the supernatural world and is thus key to our knowledge of many African myths.

Africa is changing rapidly. Many Africans, faithful to the idea of a supreme God, have embraced Islam or Christianity. Yet traditional myths remain alive on the lips of storytellers and medicine men – and find a still wider audience through the writings of travellers and anthropologists from outside the continent. For Africans and outsiders alike, they are still some of the most enthralling stories ever told.



A KING'S MURDER

A popular myth from ancient Egypt narrates the story of a tragic rivalry for the throne of Egypt between two divine brothers, the virtuous Osiris and the wicked Set, and the subsequent dispute between Set and Horus, the son of Osiris. The myth was well known because it dealt with the rule of Egypt, and also because the story of the death and revival of Osiris gave people hope of an afterlife.



Horus fights Set
This stone relief from the Temple of Horus at Edfu, Egypt, depicts a scene from the battle Horus fought against Set, with the goddess Isis at the helm of the boat.

THE MYTH

The first king of Egypt was the god Osiris; like some rulers of Egypt after him, he took his sister, Isis, as his wife. He was a good king, much liked by his people, and Isis was a popular queen. But Osiris had a wicked and violent brother, Set, who was jealous of Osiris's power and lusted after Isis. To get rid of Osiris, Set tricked the king into climbing into a wooden chest, which he then sealed and threw into the Nile. Osiris was dead by the time Isis found the box, but she retrieved the king's body. Set discovered what Isis had done so he hacked Osiris's body into many pieces. Although it was supposedly impossible to destroy the body of a god, Set had all but done so.

REVIVING OSIRIS

Isis decided to salvage Osiris's body. With the help of her sister, Nephthys, who was the wife of Set, she gathered the fragments of Osiris's body, joined them together, and bound them tightly to make the first mummy. Then, transforming herself into a bird of prey – a kite – she hovered over the body, beating her wings to infuse it with the breath of life. Osiris breathed for long enough to impregnate Isis. Later, Osiris departed for the Underworld. Isis then fled from Set, taking with her a guard of seven scorpions.

While she was fleeing, Isis was treated inhospitably by a rich woman, and one of the scorpions bit the woman's child. Isis took pity on the child and used her magic to cure the infant. But later, when she gave birth to her own son, Horus, he, in turn, was bitten by a scorpion and Isis, who had used up her power, could not cure him. Fortunately, Ra, the sun god, saw Isis in distress, took pity on her, and sent the moon god Thoth to cure Horus.

Hippopotamus
The hippopotamus was a much-feared creature of the Nile, capable of overturning a craft sailing on the river, as Set did when he took the form of the beast to capsize Horus's boat.

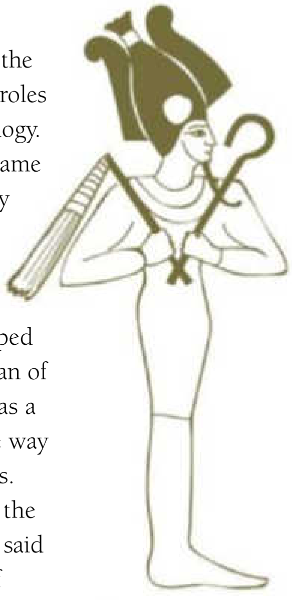
HORUS AND SET

Meanwhile, Set had usurped the kingship of Egypt. When Horus grew up, he challenged his uncle for the throne, and the two fought many times. On one occasion, Set blinded a sleeping Horus. When Isis found her son blinded, she nursed him and restored his sight. Then Set tried to rape Horus, and told the other gods that the young man was unworthy to be king because he had slept with Set. But the gods found out that Set was lying.

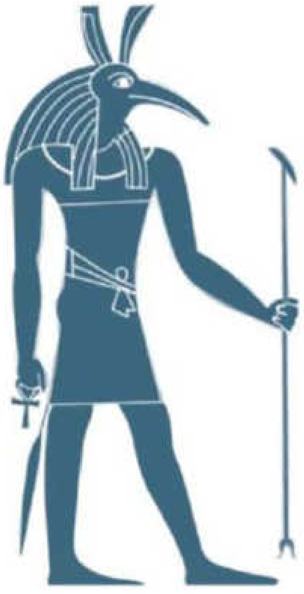
Finally, Set challenged Horus to a boat race, insisting that the vessels used in the race should be made of stone. Horus tricked his uncle by using a wooden boat he had plastered to look like stone. Set's boat sank, and in his anger, he turned himself into a hippopotamus and capsized Horus's vessel. But the gods at last saw that Horus was truly worthy and made him king, while Set was exiled.

KEY CHARACTERS

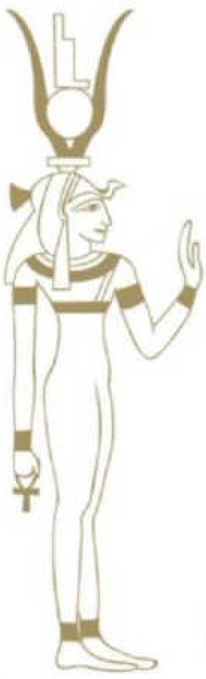
The characters in the tragic story of the murder of Osiris have a number of roles in other aspects of Egyptian mythology. After being killed by Set, Osiris became the ruler of the Underworld, a very important position in the Egyptian cosmos, which meant that he was widely worshipped. Isis was a very prominent deity too, worshipped as the goddess of magic and guardian of the dead. She won great devotion as a mother goddess, on account of the way she cared for both Osiris and Horus. Horus became a sky god who took the form of a falcon, and his eyes were said to be the sun and moon. The eye of Horus, or the Wadjet Eye, became the most popular of all Egyptian amulets. Set, on the other hand, was a sinister figure, a god of chaos and the desert.



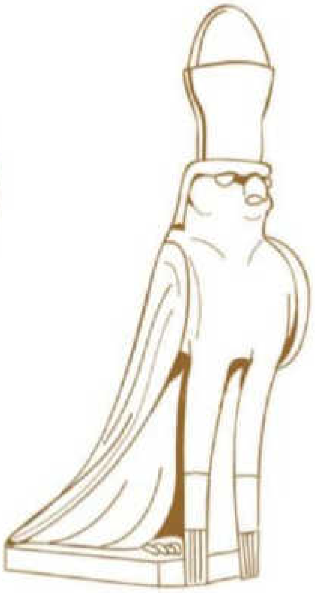
▲ **Osiris**
Wearing a crown of ostrich feathers, Osiris is depicted as a mummy with the king's symbols, the crook and flail.



▲ **Set**
Set is seen as a mythical beast with a long, curved muzzle, a two-tufted head, and a straight tail.



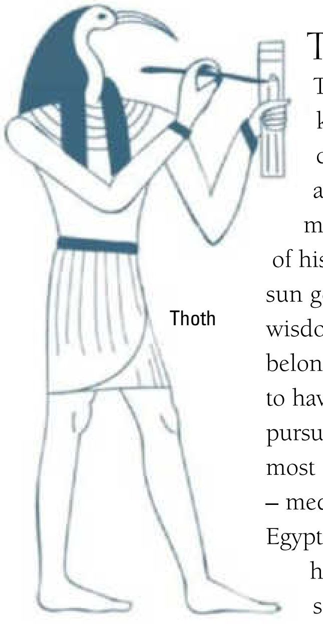
▲ **Isis**
Isis wears a throne-shaped crown, which indicates that she originally personified the throne of the pharaohs.



▲ **Horus**
Horus is often depicted as a falcon or a humanoid figure with a falcon's head, or as a child in human form.

▲ **Writing tools**
The Egyptians used reed pens to write with, dipping them into ink and making marks on papyrus, a material also made from reeds. The shape of the reed pen was associated with Thoth's narrow beak.

THOTH

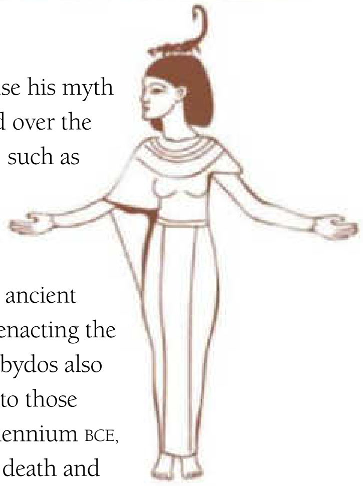


Thoth

The ibis-headed Thoth was the god of time, knowledge, writing, and the moon. His curving beak resembled the crescent moon, and his black and white feathers denoted the moon's waxing and waning. Certain accounts of his origin say that he was the son of Ra, the sun god, and that he either inherited his wisdom from his father or found it in books belonging to the sun god. Thoth was said to have invented a range of intellectual pursuits, including astronomy, law, music, and – most relevant in the myth of Osiris and Horus – medicine. He was also the inventor of the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing system, and since he was also a god of magic, hieroglyphs were said to have magical powers.

THE CULT OF OSIRIS

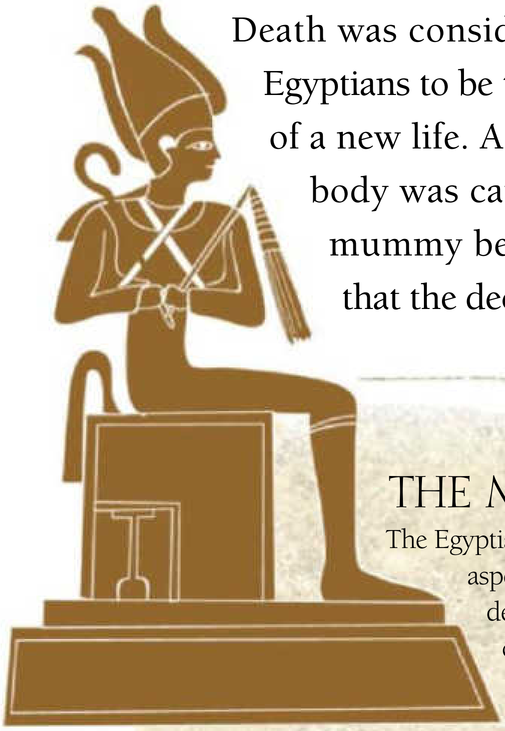
Osiris was revered by the Egyptians because his myth gave hope of a life after death. He presided over the Underworld, and along with other deities, such as Anubis and Serket, he oversaw a series of rituals through which the souls of the dead passed into the afterlife. His cult originated at Abydos, an important city in ancient Egypt, where a festival was often held, re-enacting the story of the god's murder. The temple at Abydos also held secret rituals that were not disclosed to those outside Osiris's priesthood. By the 1st millennium BCE, other temples began to celebrate the god's death and rebirth, linking them with winter and the spring.



Serket

▲ **Temple of Osiris**
The sanctuary of Osiris at the temple at Abydos is decorated with inscriptions and murals illustrating various scenes from the life story of this ancient Egyptian god.

JOURNEY TO THE LAND OF THE DEAD



Osiris
Osiris presided over the process in which the deceased travelled from this life to the afterlife.

Death was considered by the ancient Egyptians to be the potential beginning of a new life. After a person died, the body was carefully preserved as a mummy because it was believed that the deceased began a journey through the Underworld to the next life, where their souls would need to take up residence in their bodies once again. This belief in the migration of the soul to the Underworld was widespread and the journey was described in great detail in a complex myth.

THE MYTH

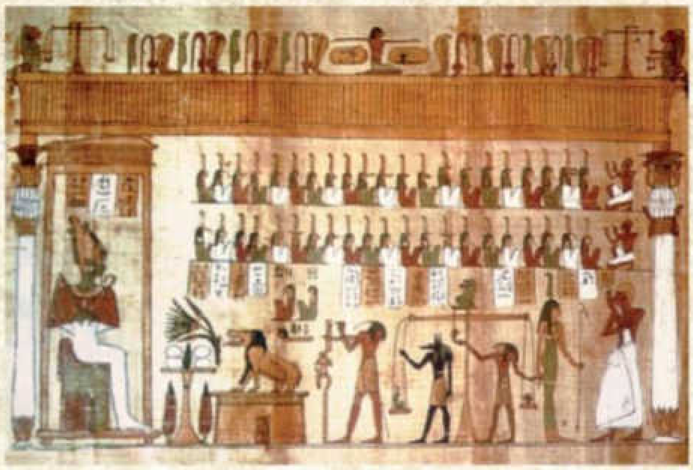
The Egyptians believed that many spiritual aspects of a person's being survived death and, if they were correctly cared for, could re-inhabit the person's body in the afterlife. Foremost of these was the *ka*, the person's life force, and the *ba*, the soul. If all went well after death, the *ka* and *ba* would unite to form a spirit that would live again inside the body. To achieve this, the dead body had to be preserved appropriately through mummification, which was a re-enactment of what happened to the god Osiris's body after he died. The process involved a series of 75 rituals, in which parts of the body would be touched with special instruments to be reanimated – as a result, the body would become a fitting vehicle for the person's *ka*. This process also identified the deceased with the god Osiris, ensuring that they would set out on the journey to everlasting life.

JOURNEY THROUGH DUAT

The deceased then began their journey through a realm known as Duat or the Underworld, which was full of many horrors and perils. Here, they had to contend with dangers such as fiery lakes and venomous snakes. There were many special spells that could be recited to protect the voyagers on the way. These spells were written down in a *Book of the Dead*, a compilation of important texts that was often buried with the mummies so that the deceased had access to the right spells on their journey through the dark realm.

JUDGING THE SOULS

The souls of the deceased were judged at a place near the end of the journey, the Hall of the Two Truths. The souls were put through a test and if they passed, the deceased would declare their innocence and then be judged by Osiris and 42 assessor gods. Osiris was assisted in his task by judges who included Ra, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Isis, Nephthys, Horus, and Hathor. Each god judged a particular aspect of the soul. Three possible fates awaited the soul after the assessment. The truly wicked characters were condemned to a second and final death devoid of mummification and with no chance of passing unharmed through Duat. The ordinary souls were sent to serve Osiris eternally, and the virtuous souls were allowed to move on to a happy and free eternal life.

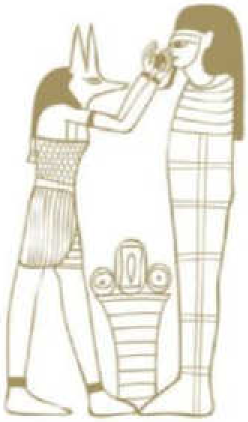


Assessor gods
The assessor gods had names such as Bone-breaker and Blood-drinker, and looked on eagerly when the souls protested their innocence. They drank the blood of the deceased if there was any proof of guilt.

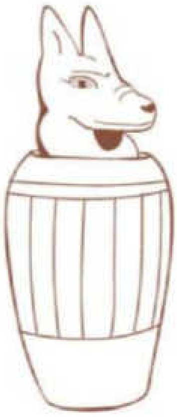
PREPARING FOR DUAT

The preparatory rituals for the afterlife were complex. First, the embalmers took the deceased person's body to their workshop (known as the Beautiful House), where they removed the liver, lungs, intestines, and stomach, placing each organ in canopic jars. Then the body was covered completely with a chemical mixture of salts called natron, packed with dry material such as sawdust, and wrapped in linen bandages, with labels and amulets attached to identify and protect the body. The mummy was then placed in a coffin for secure storage.

An Egyptian mummy



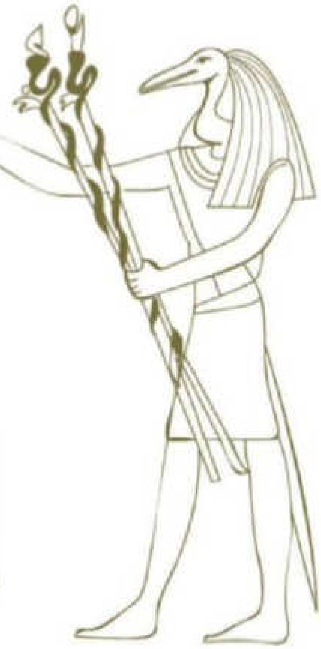
▲ **Anubis**
The ancient Egyptians believed that the jackal-god Anubis had invented the art of mummification.



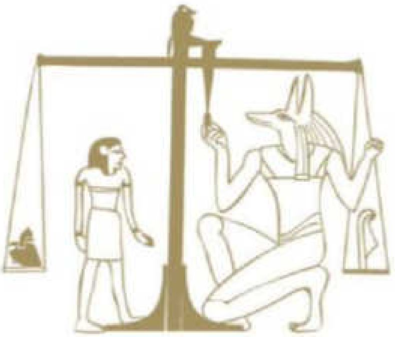
◄ **Canopic jar**
Jars capped with the heads of Underworld gods, such as Anubis or Osiris, were used to preserve the organs of the deceased person.

THE HALL OF THE TWO TRUTHS

Souls were judged in the Hall of the Two Truths, which contained a balance in which the heart – the only vital organ not removed from the mummified body – was weighed. The feather of Ma'at, goddess of truth and justice, was placed against the heart on the scales. If the heart outweighed the feather, it would be deemed full of sin, and Ammut, the Devourer of the Dead, would feast on it. If the heart was lighter, the soul moved on to the next stage of judgement.



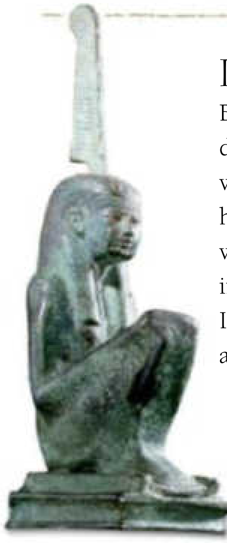
► **Thoth**
The god of wisdom and scribe to the gods, Thoth was tasked with waiting in the hall to record the judgement passed on the souls of the deceased.



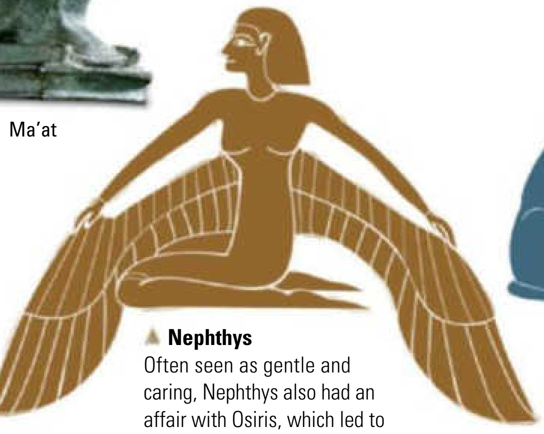
▼ **Weighing the heart**
The god Amun presided over the weighing of every heart, an organ believed to contain a record of a person's former deeds.

DEITIES OF THE UNDERWORLD

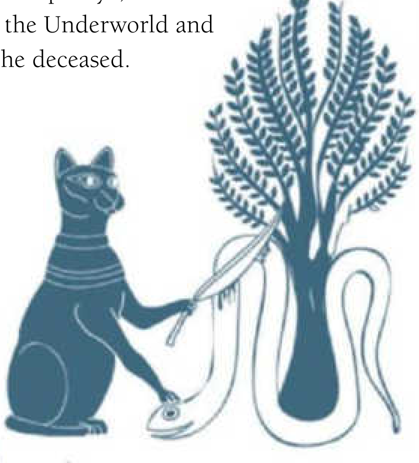
Besides Osiris, Anubis, and the ferocious assessor gods, several other deities were associated with the Egyptian Underworld. Some of these were sinister, shadowy beings with the heads of rams, tortoises, or hippopotamuses. Others included the serpent-god Apep, or Apophis, who constantly waged war on Ra, the sun god. Among the less intimidating deities was the goddess Nephthys, sister of Isis, who led the pharaohs through the Underworld and also cared for the stored organs of the deceased.



Ma'at



▲ **Nephthys**
Often seen as gentle and caring, Nephthys also had an affair with Osiris, which led to the birth of the deity Anubis.



▲ **Ra and Apep**
The sun god Ra transformed himself into a cat to defeat the serpent Apep, one of the most feared and vilest creatures in the Underworld.

BODY AND SOUL

The *ba,* or soul, was imagined to be a winged being with the head of the deceased and the body and wings of a hawk that flew free of the body at the time of death. Each night, it had to be reunited with the dead person's body; this could only happen if the corpse had been mummified correctly. A person's shadow and name were also thought to have an independent existence that could be perpetuated by mummification.

Winged *ba*

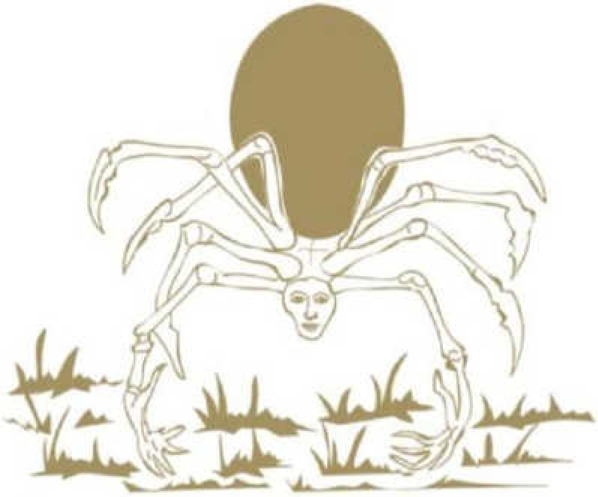
ANANSE

The spider Ananse is a trickster and also a culture hero in West Africa, especially among the Ashanti people of Ghana. Besides his tricks, Ananse is well known for using his intellect to outwit creatures much stronger than himself – stories about these pranks are commonly told both for amusement and to highlight the fact that brains are as important as muscles. In some myths, the trickster acts as an intermediary between human beings and the sky god Nyame. Some even believe that it was Ananse who persuaded Nyame to create the sun and moon so that people on Earth could benefit from having night and day.

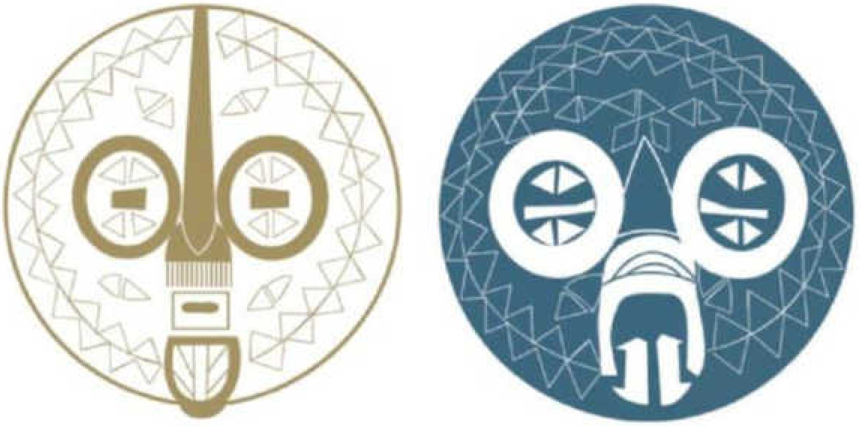
MESSENGER TO THE SKY GOD

Nyame, the sky god, was the creator of all things, but he sat aloof from his creations. Down below on the Earth, people worked constantly in the fields – there was no time for them to rest. Ananse heard their complaints, and spun a thread up to Nyame to ask for help. So Nyame created night, when everyone could sleep. But the humans were frightened of the darkness, so Nyame set the moon in the sky to provide light at night. Then the people shivered because it was always cold, so yet again, Ananse went to tell Nyame, and he put the sun in the sky to give warmth. This time, the scorching heat was too much for the mere mortals, and once more, Ananse climbed up his thread to ask for help on behalf of the people. This time, Nyame sent great rains to cool everyone, but his rains were so heavy that they caused floods and people drowned. Nyame made the floods recede and, finally, everybody was content.

Ananse beaker
Embossed with the relief work of a large spider in its web, this bronze vessel from Nigeria points to the popularity of the trickster Ananse in West African myths.



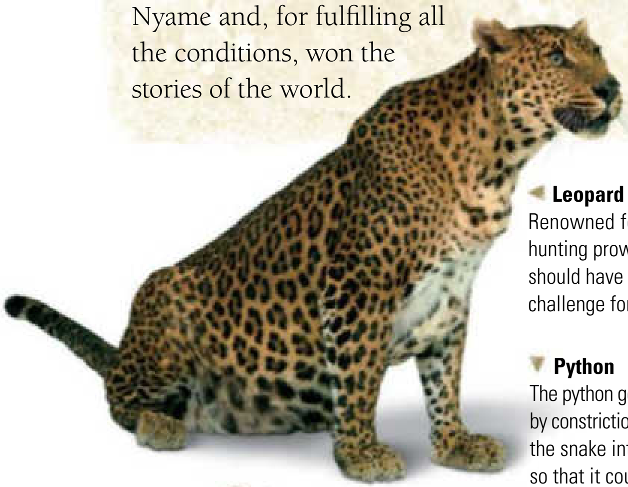
Ananse weeding grass
One story talks about how Ananse won the hand of Nyame's daughter by clearing a field full of itchy weeds without scratching himself.



African sun and moon masks
Masks representing the sun and the moon are common in West Africa. As the markers of day and night, the sun and the moon are very important, and Ananse was credited with enabling their creation.

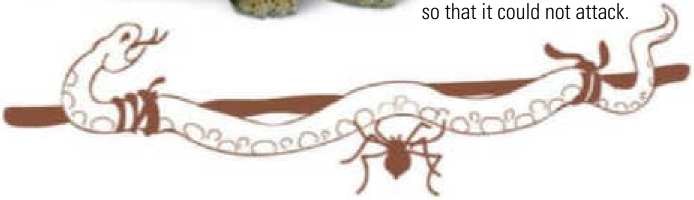
MASTER OF STORIES

Nyame owned all the stories in the world. Ananse wanted to buy the stories from him, and as payment, Nyame asked Ananse to bring him some hornets, a python, and a leopard. Ananse tricked the hornets into a calabash. He then went to the python carrying a long staff and declared that he was unclear about which was longer, the snake or the staff. The python lay by the staff, and Ananse quickly tied it to the staff, thus trapping it. Next the spider dug a pit for the leopard and covered it with branches. The unsuspecting leopard fell into it and was caught. Ananse delivered the animals to Nyame and, for fulfilling all the conditions, won the stories of the world.



Leopard
Renowned for its speed and hunting prowess, the leopard should have posed an impossible challenge for the spider.

Python
The python generally kills its prey by constriction, so Ananse tricked the snake into being tied up so that it could not attack.



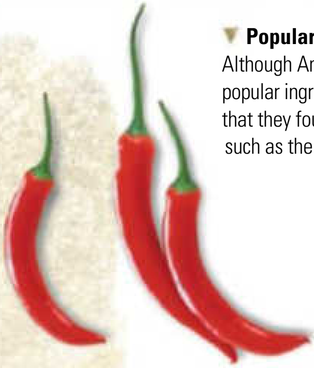
TRICKING THE ELEPHANT

One day, an elephant was bored and challenged the other animals to a headbutting competition. Fearing the elephant's strength, none of the animals rose to the challenge, except for Ananse. It was decided that the contest would take place over 14 nights, with the elephant having the first seven butts over the first seven nights. Ananse tricked an antelope into coming to Ananse's house at night to receive some food. Since it was a time of famine, the antelope agreed. That night, the elephant butted the antelope in the dark and killed it. Over the next six days, Ananse tricked more animals in the same way. When it was his turn to butt the elephant, the spider took a hammer and wedge, and aimed with great care at the creature's head. He killed the elephant with a single blow, outsmarting it in this uneven contest.

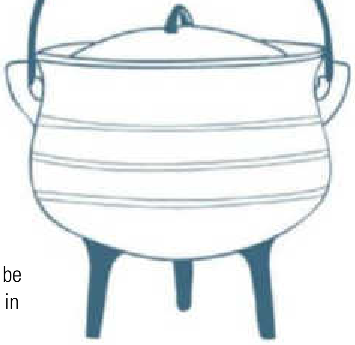
Elephant
In one version of the story, after the first attack with the hammer, the elephant merely complained of a headache, but on the second night, Ananse refined his aim and killed the elephant.

THE ORIGINS OF ARGUMENT

Once, there was a man who argued with everyone, and killed several animals because they disagreed with him. Ananse decided to meet the man. When the man began to tell Ananse fantastic stories, Ananse invited him to his house. On his arrival, the man could not find the spider, but Ananse's children fed him the hottest of chillies, which burned his mouth. He asked for water, but Ananse's children explained that the water at the top of a pot belonged to their father and they were afraid of mixing it with the water below when pouring from the pot. The man argued with this preposterous story, and when Ananse returned, the spider declared that the man must die since he continued to argue. So the spiders killed the man, tore his body to pieces, and threw the bits everywhere. In this way, argument spread around the world.



Popular folklore ingredient
Although American in origin, chillies became such a popular ingredient for flavouring in West African food that they found their way into the region's folklore, such as the myth about Ananse and the man.



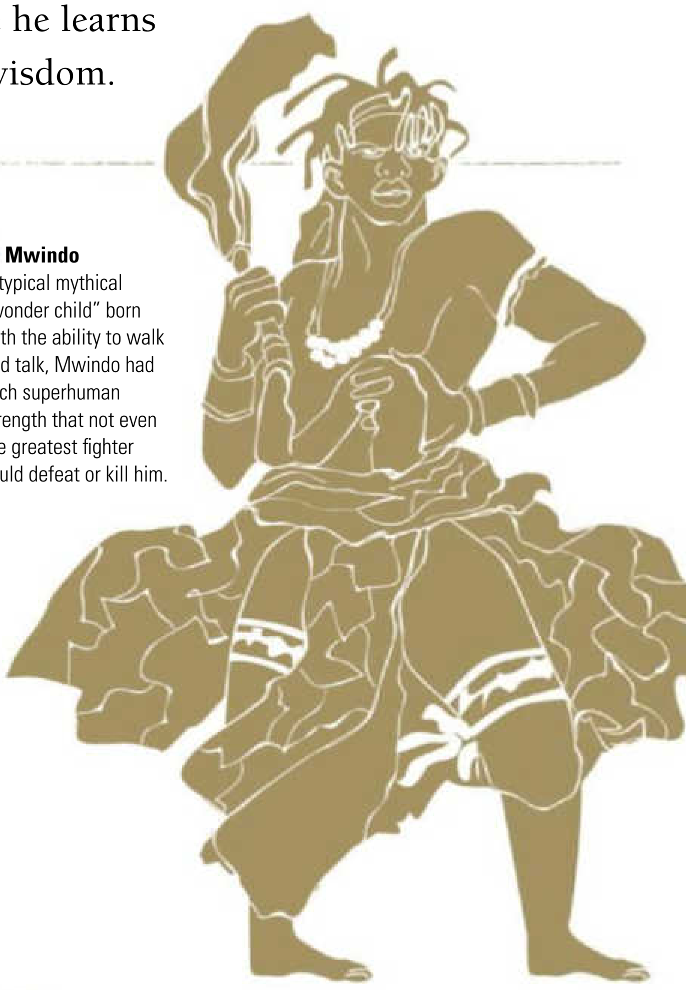
African cooking pot
Metal cooking pots are widely used to boil food over an open fire. Such a vessel can also be used to store water, as in this story of Ananse.

MWINDO

The story of Mwindo is a traditional epic of the Nyanga people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo that has been passed down through oral performance. Mwindo's miraculous powers include both invincible strength and the ability to see into the future. His adventures involve a long rivalry with his own father, and during the course of the epic, Mwindo travels to the Underworld, where he displays his strength, and also to the sky, where he learns new wisdom.

MWINDO'S BIRTH

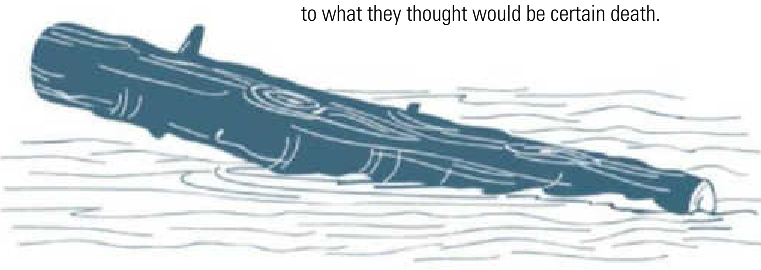
Mwindo was the son of Shemwindo, the chief of Tubondo, and his favourite wife. From birth, he possessed powers of prophecy, the ability to destroy evil, and the means to move with equal ease whether on land, underwater, in the air, or underground. But Shemwindo did not want a son, especially such a powerful one, as he feared that a younger man would challenge his authority. He planned to kill Mwindo, but was unsuccessful thanks to his son's miraculous powers. Shemwindo therefore told his councillors to seal Mwindo inside a drum and to throw the drum into the river to dispose of his rival. The councillors did so, but the drum found its way to Shemwindo's sister, who rescued Mwindo.



► **Mwindo**
A typical mythical "wonder child" born with the ability to walk and talk, Mwindo had such superhuman strength that not even the greatest fighter could defeat or kill him.

◄ **Mwindo's flyswatter**
Mwindo carried a flyswatter with magical powers. When someone threw a spear at him, he could deflect the weapon by waving the flyswatter in the air.

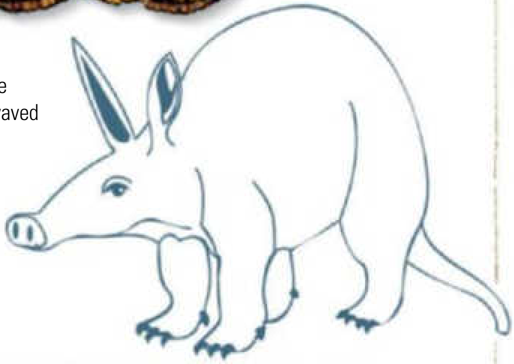
▼ **Sealed inside a log**
In some versions of the myth, Shemwindo's accomplices sealed the young Mwindo inside a hollow log and floated him down the river to what they thought would be certain death.



I AM MWINDO, THE ONE BORN WALKING, THE ONE BORN TALKING. O MY FATHER, YOU TRY TO KILL ME… BUT WHAT CAN YOU DO AGAINST ME?

Aaron Shepard, *The Magic Flyswatter: A Superhero Tale of Africa*, 2008

▲ **Cowrie shell belt**
Muisa, the ruler of the Underworld, had a magic belt that crushed everyone it hit. Muisa ordered it to strike Mwindo, smashing him to the ground, but Mwindo waved his flyswatter and the belt could do him no harm.

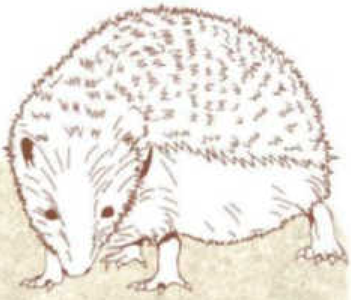


► **Ntumba the aardvark**
While chasing his father, Mwindo came across an aardvark spirit called Ntumba. He saw that Shemwindo was hiding behind Ntumba, whom he punched for concealing his father.

IN THE UNDERWORLD

After Mwindo escaped from the drum in which Shemwindo had trapped him, he vowed to return home and fight his father. His maternal uncles gave him iron armour, and together they destroyed Shemwindo's home, killing many people, but Shemwindo escaped to the Underworld. Mwindo chased him and, upon reaching the Underworld, had to fight its ruler, Muisa, before he could approach his father. Finally, Shemwindo surrendered, and apologized for trying to kill Mwindo. The pair agreed that the kingdom would be split in two, one half ruled by Shemwindo and the other by Mwindo. They returned to Earth and Mwindo restored to life all the people who had been killed in the fighting.

► **The Lightning Master**
The spirit called Nkuba or Lightning Master took the form of a hedgehog. He helped Mwindo with bolts of lightning when he was attacking Shemwindo's village.

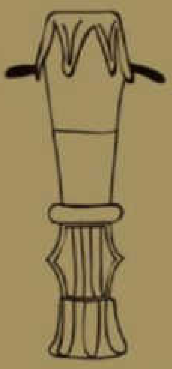


IN THE SKY

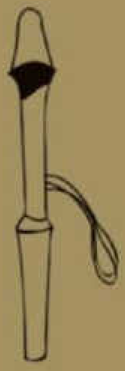
One day, Mwindo and some of his followers were out hunting when a dragon came and ate some of his companions. Mwindo killed the dragon and rescued his men from its belly, but the spirit Lightning Master, a friend of both Mwindo and the dragon, was upset at the death of the beast. So Lightning Master took Mwindo into the sky to teach him a lesson. In the sky Mwindo had to endure many ordeals, after which Lightning Master reminded him that no human, not even a superhero, should treat any animal with contempt, as they were all considered sacred to the gods. Then Mwindo was allowed to return to Earth, where he explained to his people that all creatures were sacred and should be respected. After this he ruled his people wisely and peacefully for many years.

TELLING THE EPIC

The Mwindo epic has been recorded in writing, but it is essentially a performance piece, and takes the form of a long narrative punctuated with songs, riddles, proverbs, prayers, and other asides, accompanied with the music of drum and flute. The storytellers who perform the epic pass it down from one generation to the next and prize the narrative not merely as entertainment but as an embodiment of the history, values, and beliefs of their people. People believe that the act of performing the epic protects the storyteller from disease and death.



Congo Drum

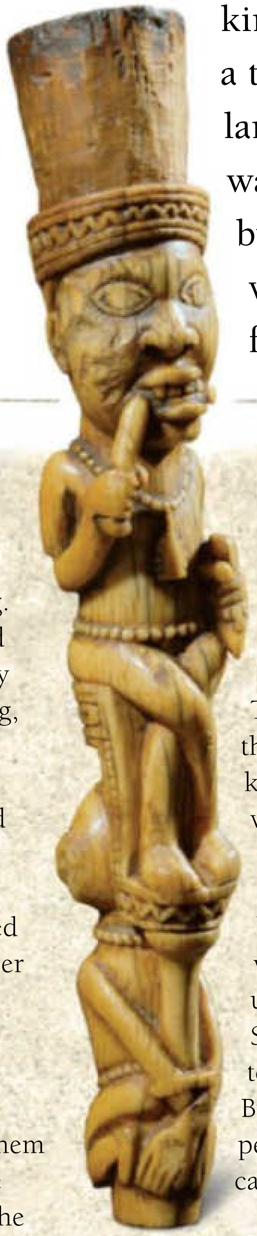


Congo Flute

▲ **Congo dancer**
Dancing is central to African culture and storytelling. A complete performance of the Mwindo epic, typically presented in traditional costume, could take several days of dancing, singing, and reciting.

THE WISE KING

A myth of the Bushongo people of the southeastern Congo region describes the achievements of their greatest ruler, Shamba Bolongongo, who is seen both as a king and a culture hero. Shamba, who was wise and just, is said to have been a real king who reigned in the 17th century, a time when many tribes united to create large and powerful political factions. He was revered not only for his great wisdom, but also because he avoided violence and war, preferring to use his intelligence to forge alliances or resolve disputes.



Shamba Bolongongo
This carved wooden sceptre depicts the king sitting on his throne, chewing on a medicinal root. His crossed legs and ritual nudity are typical of the Bushongo people.

THE MYTH

Shamba Bolongongo, a prince of the Bushongo people, was very inquisitive and loved learning. As heir to the throne, he realized that he would be able to rule over his subjects more efficiently if he knew more about them, their way of living, and their needs. So when he was still young, Shamba set out to journey far and wide. On his many travels, he found out all that he could about the different peoples who lived in his kingdom and in the lands beyond his own. The prince learned many things that he believed would eventually help his own people to prosper and to live peacefully and happily.

THE CULTURE HERO

When Shamba returned from his long journey and became the king of his people, he taught them many new skills that have been used ever since among the Bushongo. The king showed them the technique of making textiles out of raffia fibres, and how to turn these textiles into clothes. He taught them how to prepare the nourishing cassava root properly, ensuring that it was cooked well enough to remove the poison that could be left behind in the plant. Shamba also planted palm trees and used them for making oil. And he introduced the Bushongo to tobacco smoking.

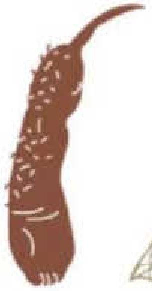
THE MAN OF PEACE

The Bushongo were a warlike people, skilled in the use of weapons. But Shamba hated violence and killing, and wanted to introduce his people to the ways of peace. Soon after ascending the throne, he issued an order banning the use of bows and arrows, as well as the shongo, a type of throwing knife, in battle. At first the people thought that criminals would thrive under a king who did not allow the use of weapons, but they were proved wrong. Shamba tried harder than any king before him to hunt down criminals and punish them harshly. But he was not very keen on handing out the death penalty, and would only do so as a last resort in the case of the most hardened of offenders.

The people saw that Shamba respected all his subjects. He was especially mindful of women and children, and severely punished anyone who tried to harm them. Whenever people approached him with a problem or a dispute, he would give good advice or offer a fair judgement. Ever since that time, Shamba has been held up as the ideal ruler, an example that every Bushongo king has attempted to follow – even though not all of them have been as successful or as wise. His period of rule is often said to have been a golden age by the Bushongo people.

Wooden dagger
Shamba's symbol of office was a dagger, though this was merely a ceremonial weapon, as the king disliked violence so intensely he would have used it only in extreme situations.

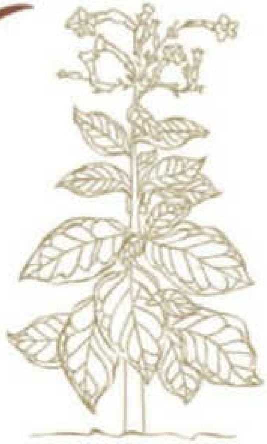
Raffia fabric
The fibrous leaves and branches of the raffia palm are useful for making ropes, roof coverings, and other items, but are most commonly seen in boldly patterned fabric.



Cassava
Once introduced, this plant quickly spread across Africa, becoming a staple food. The right way of cooking the plant, by detoxifying it, was said to be one of Shamba's gifts.

THE CULTURE HERO'S GIFTS

Shamba was credited with introducing a number of skills into the lives of his people that later proved beneficial. It is uncertain if these innovations were introduced by the actual 17th-century king on whom the story is based. Items like cassava and tobacco came from the Americas in the 16th century, so the story could well be based on fact. Raffia, however, is native to Africa, and the historical Shamba may have pioneered its use in making textiles.

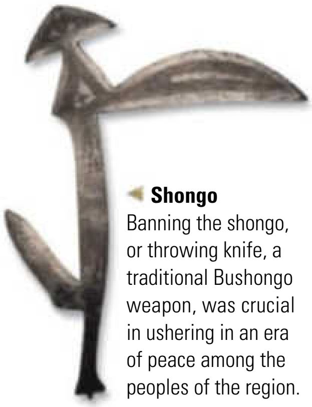


Tobacco plant
European merchants shipped tobacco from America to West Africa in the 1560s, after which it may have been promoted by local rulers such as Shamba.

> KILL NEITHER MAN, WOMAN, NOR CHILD. ARE THEY NOT THE CHILDREN OF CHEMBE [GOD], AND HAVE THEY NOT THE RIGHT TO LIVE? Shamba Bolongongo

PEACE AND JUSTICE

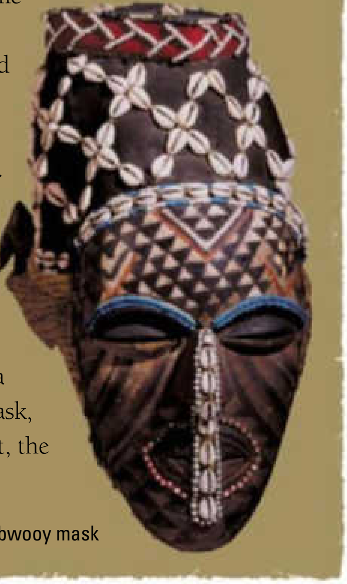
In traditional West African societies, arguments or disputes between two people or families were resolved by the head of the village. Similarly, disputes on a larger scale would be resolved by the king. People looked up to these leaders because of the authority that their status gave them, an authority that was often enhanced by the belief that the leaders were linked to ancestors and gods. Subjects used to obey their rulers because the ruler had the power to enforce his will, but when a king had a personal reputation for wisdom, his judgements were respected all the more.



Shongo
Banning the shongo, or throwing knife, a traditional Bushongo weapon, was crucial in ushering in an era of peace among the peoples of the region.

THE BUSHONGO

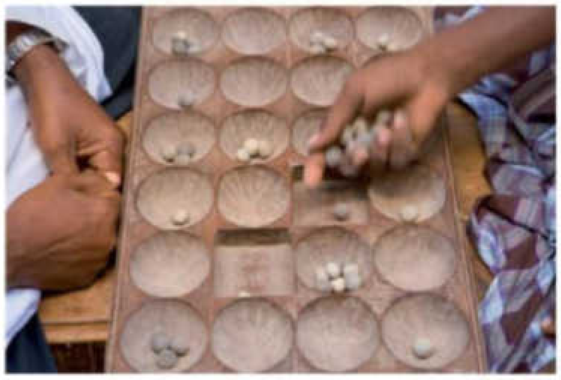
The Bushongo, dominant among the Kuba people of Central Africa, have existed as a federation of tribes since the 16th century. They have a rich mythology, centred on many spirits of nature and past kings. Their creation myth narrates how Bumba, the supreme deity, vomited up the sun, moon, and stars, followed by animals and the first human, Woot. He then handed over the world to the human race. During ritual ceremonies, every king wears a Moshambwooy mask, representing Woot, the primary ancestor.



Moshambwooy mask

THE PEOPLE'S GAME

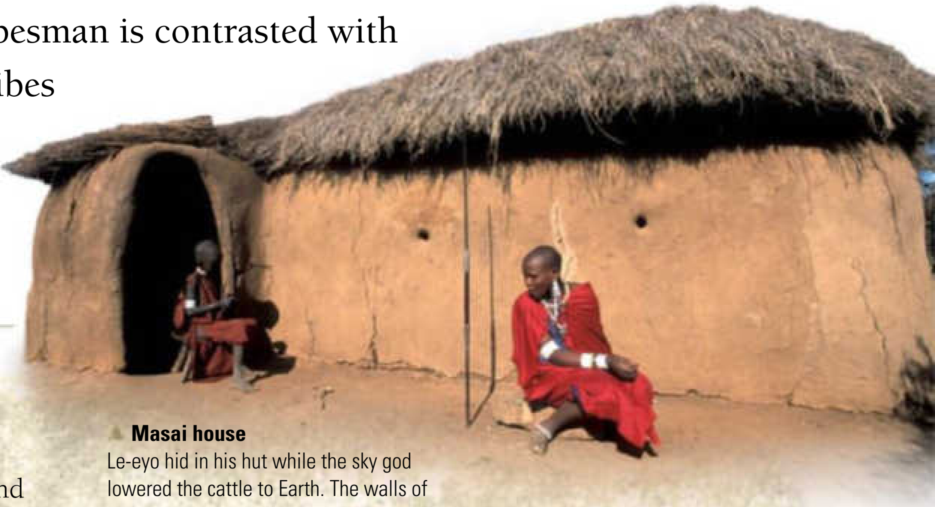
Another innovation popularized by Shamba was a game called Lele or Mancala. Shamba devised it because he found out that his people were addicted to gambling. Wishing to encourage them to take up a safer amusement, he introduced Lele. Claimed by some to be the world's oldest board game, Lele, in fact, originated in the Arab world and made its way across Africa. It is played using a board with small depressions (about 32 in number), in which the players put small counters, nuts, or stones, which need to be accumulated during the game.



Playing Lele
The game of lele is played by two people. Different boards have different numbers of depressions, but the objective remains constant – to win more counters than an opponent.

THE FIRST CATTLE

The Masai, a cattle-herding people who live in Kenya, have several myths about how they came to own cattle. Other herding tribes in Africa have similar stories, which are testimony to the important role of cattle in their prosperity. In one myth, a Masai tribesman is contrasted with a man from one of the hunter-gatherer tribes of Kenya and Tanzania, who are widely referred to by the herding people as the Dorobo (the ones without cattle).



Masai house
Le-eyo hid in his hut while the sky god lowered the cattle to Earth. The walls of traditional Masai houses are plastered with cow dung, which dries hard in the sun.

THE MYTH

Long ago there lived a Dorobo man who shared his land with an elephant and a snake. One day, the elephant had a calf. When the Dorobo approached the mother elephant, she attacked him to protect her young, and the man killed her in self-defence. The snake was lurking nearby and he slew that too. The alarmed elephant calf ran away, fearing for its life, and the Dorobo was left alone.

A MESSAGE FROM THE GODS

The baby elephant ran until it met a Masai tribesman called Le-eyo and told him what had happened to its mother and the snake. Intrigued by the tale, Le-eyo travelled to the place where the Dorobo lived, and peered through the bush to see what was going on. He was amazed to see Naiteru-kop, the messenger of the gods, talking to the Dorobo. Naiteru-kop told the Dorobo to meet him the next morning at a clearing in the forest, where he would be given a great gift. Le-eyo decided that he would get to the meeting place early, before the Dorobo arrived. When the next day dawned, Le-eyo hurried off to the meeting place while the Dorobo was still fast asleep. When Le-eyo reached the clearing, Naiteru-kop spoke to him, thinking he was the Dorobo. The messenger told him to go home and build a fence around his hut, then kill and skin a wild animal, and put the meat inside the skin. After doing this he was to stay inside his hut and wait. Naiteru-kop insisted that he must stay indoors, even if he heard a great thundering sound outside, and Le-eyo said that he would be sure to obey.

THE COMING OF THE CATTLE

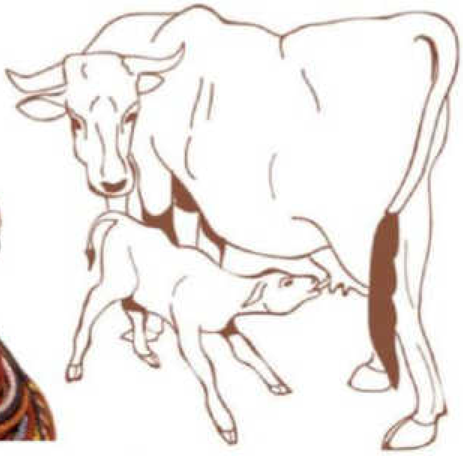
So Le-eyo went home, and did everything as instructed. Soon there was a thundering sound outside. At first, Le-eyo stayed inside, as the sound was so great that he trembled with fear. But eventually he went out to investigate. To his astonishment, he saw that Enkai, the sky god, had lowered a strip of hide from the sky and a huge herd of cattle had come down on it. As he watched, the strip of hide disappeared into the sky. Le-eyo now had plenty of cattle, but the sky god told him that he would have had even more if only he had done as he was told. From then on the Masai became the owners of all the world's cattle while the Dorobo were forced to carry on with their former way of life as hunters.

Making fire
The Masai use friction generated by rotating a fire stick to make fire. Some accounts say the cattle of the Masai came down to Earth on a fire stick.

CATTLE AND THE MASAI

The Masai believed they had been entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding all the world's cattle. In a traditional Masai settlement, everyone took part in caring for the cattle, the men herding and the women milking. The meat and milk of the cow was the staple diet of the people, its hide was used to make clothes, and its horns and bones were made into utensils. People even drew blood from a cow if there was nothing else to drink. So the number of cows kept by a family was an indication of their wealth and their status in society. Even today, cattle may be used as currency when Masai people are buying and selling other goods.

Masai bride
When a Masai man marries, his family traditionally has to pay a bride-price to the woman's family, and this payment is usually made in cattle.



Status symbol
Masai families own around 15 head of cattle each, sufficient for a regular supply of milk and meat, with enough left over to breed and to exchange in transactions.

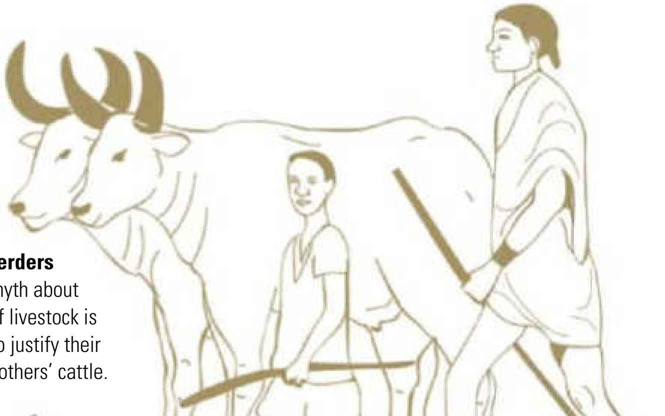
ORIGINS OF POLYGAMY

The Kikuyu farming people of Kenya have a history of intermarriage with the Masai. Kikuyu clans carry women's names and yet the men are allowed to take more than one wife. Their mythology says that the opposite arrangement once prevailed, with each woman taking several husbands. The men rebelled, changing the custom when all the women were pregnant and powerless to defend their rights. So the men gained the power to have several wives, but the women insisted that the clan names stay with the female line, threatening to kill their boy children if the men tried to impose male clan names.

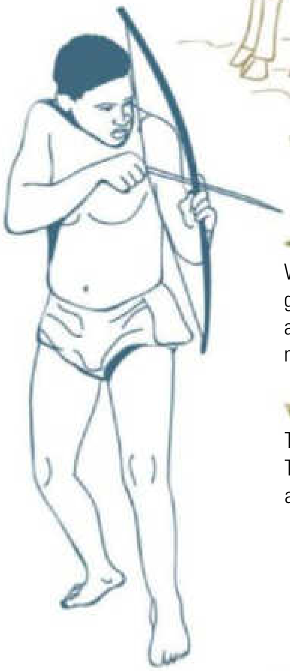
Kikuyu man with his wife
This Kikuyu couple are wearing their traditional tribal dress. The shield and spear are generally used today in ceremonial dances.

ENKAI THE CREATOR

In many Masai myths, the creator god Enkai is a central character. Enkai is the sky god who represents both the sun and the rains, and lives in the sky with his wife, Olapa, the moon. Once, Enkai told the people to leave their *kraals* (enclosures) open at night, but not everyone obeyed. Those who did discovered in the morning that Enkai had given them cows, sheep, and goats. These people became the Masai. The Dorobo became hunters and the Kikuyu took up farming for their livelihood.

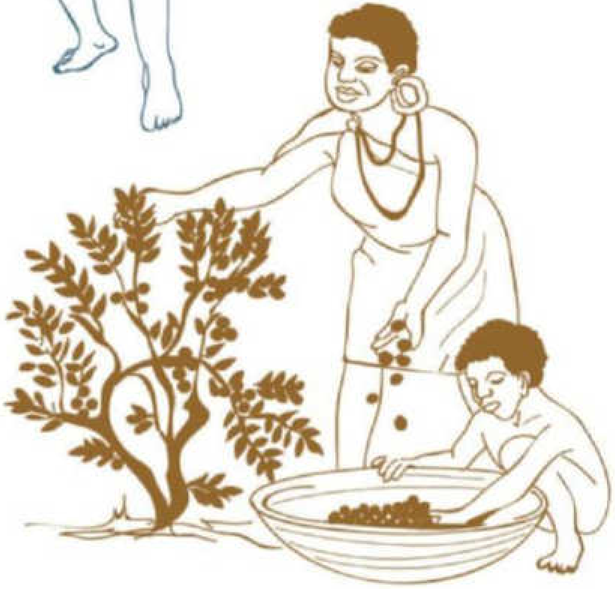


Masai herders
The Masai myth about ownership of livestock is often used to justify their right to raid others' cattle.



Dorobo hunter
When the Dorobo ignored the creator's generosity, they were left without livestock and so had to continue being hunters. But nowadays most of them live as cattle-herders.

Kikuyu farmers
The Kikuyu are Kenya's prominent farmers. They claim the supreme god placed their ancestors on the fertile soil of Mount Kenya.



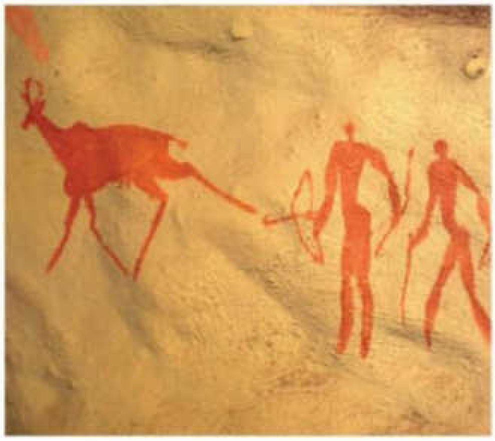
MYTHS OF THE SAN

Part of a group often known as “bushmen”, the San are a hunting people who live mainly in Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa. Their mythology includes stories about how the first people of their tribes were created, as well as accounts of events important to them, such as the beginning of hunting. Some key characters in their stories are the bee, which, as the maker of honey, is a symbol of ingenuity and wisdom; the mantis, a primal spirit involved in the creation of humanity; and the eland, a type of antelope and a popular quarry for hunters.

THE FIRST HUMANS

At the beginning of time, a honey bee carried a praying mantis over the dark waters of a river. But the waters stretched far and wide, and as the bee looked for a solid patch of ground on which he could land, he became tired of flying with the weight of the mantis on his back. The mantis seemed to grow heavier and heavier, and the bee flew lower and lower until, quite exhausted, he began skimming on the surface of the water. As he floated, he saw a large white flower that was half open, waiting for morning to come so that the sun’s rays could help it bloom. The bee set the mantis down on the flower, planting within the mantis the seed of the first human before dying. When the sun rose, the flower opened wide. As the air warmed, the mantis awoke and the seed germinated to create the first San.

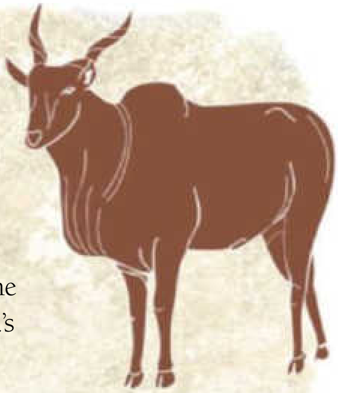
▲ **South African landscape**
The San live in the Kalahari Desert of Southern Africa, a region where water is scarce, unlike at the time of the creation. Water is hence a precious commodity that is, for them, a symbol of life.



▲ **San rock art**
The San are outstanding painters, creating images using natural pigments on the rock of cliffs and caves. The subjects of San artists include the hunt and the animals of the Kalahari Desert, both part of their mythology.

THE FIRST HUNT

The mantis made an eland, the first of its kind, and nurtured it on honey. One day, a young man saw it at a water hole and went to tell his father, the ancestor Kwammang-a, who took his bow and shot the eland dead. The mantis had gone to gather food, and when he returned, he saw the creature dead and Kwammang-a’s followers dividing up the meat. He was enraged, and tried to shoot the hunters, but all his shots missed. Then he took the creature’s gall bladder and split it open, so that all the world was flooded with darkness as the gall flowed out. Later, he threw the bladder into the sky, where it became the moon. Since then, it has given people light as they hunt by night.



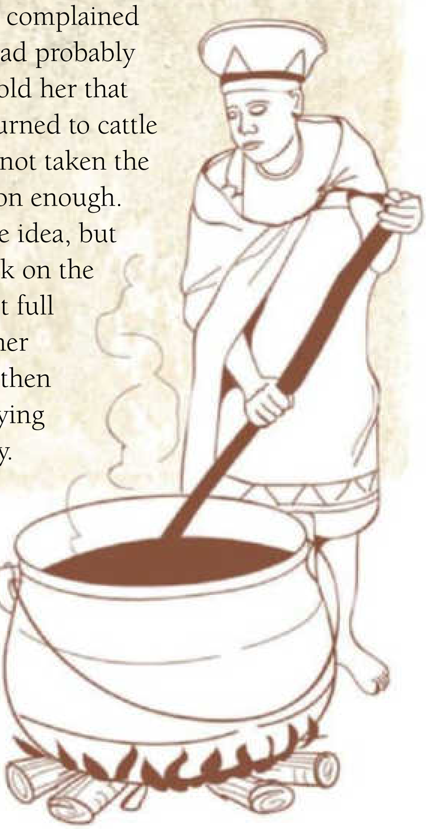
▲ **Eland**
Although San hunters pursue wildebeest or smaller creatures, the eland is a popular subject in their mythology, because it is a symbol of strength.

HLAKANYANA

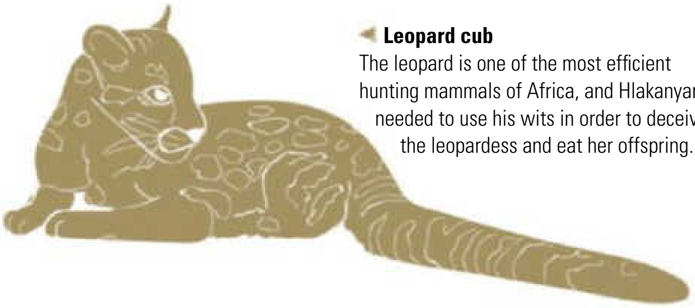
A trickster figure belonging to myths of the Xhosa and Zulu peoples of South Africa, Hlakanyana was a "wonder-child" who could talk even before he emerged from his mother's womb, and who clamoured to be let out. He could walk as soon as he was born, and immediately headed for the cattle enclosure, intent on satisfying his hunger – not with his mother's milk, but with some roasted meat. When Hlakanyana grew up, he had a series of adventures, most of which involved tricking people or animals out of food.

HLAKANYANA'S POT

One night, Hlakanyana crept out, took a number of birds caught in traps set by some other boys in the village, and gave the birds to his mother to cook. She left them in the pot to cook overnight. The following morning, Hlakanyana got up very early and ate all the meat except for the birds' heads. Then he filled the pot with cattle dung, put the heads on top, and went back to bed, pretending to be asleep. When his mother awoke, Hlakanyana got up from his bed as if he too had just woken up. He complained that she was late and had probably let the food spoil. He told her that the meat would have turned to cattle dung because she had not taken the birds out of the pot soon enough. His mother scorned the idea, but when she went to check on the food, she found the pot full of cattle dung, just as her son had predicted. He then ate the birds' heads, saying she did not deserve any.



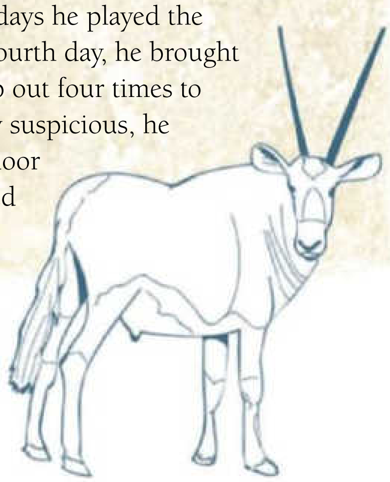
Cooking pot
Food is an integral part of many myths associated with Hlakanyana. In yet another myth, he is himself caught and put into a cooking pot by an old woman, but manages to trick his way out.



Leopard cub
The leopard is one of the most efficient hunting mammals of Africa, and Hlakanyana needed to use his wits in order to deceive the leopardess and eat her offspring.

HLAKANYANA AND THE LEOPARD CUBS

Hlakanyana once came across four leopard cubs without their mother. When the leopardess returned, she made to attack Hlakanyana. The trickster talked his way out, offering to guard the cubs while she went hunting, and saying he would build a hut for the family too. After she left, Hlakanyana built a hut with a narrow entrance, and then ate one of the cubs. When the mother returned, he brought out the remaining cubs to be suckled one at a time, and tricked her into thinking all four were safe. Over the next two days he played the same trick, and on the fourth day, he brought the single remaining cub out four times to fool her. When she grew suspicious, he escaped from the back door while the leopardess tried to squeeze her way in.



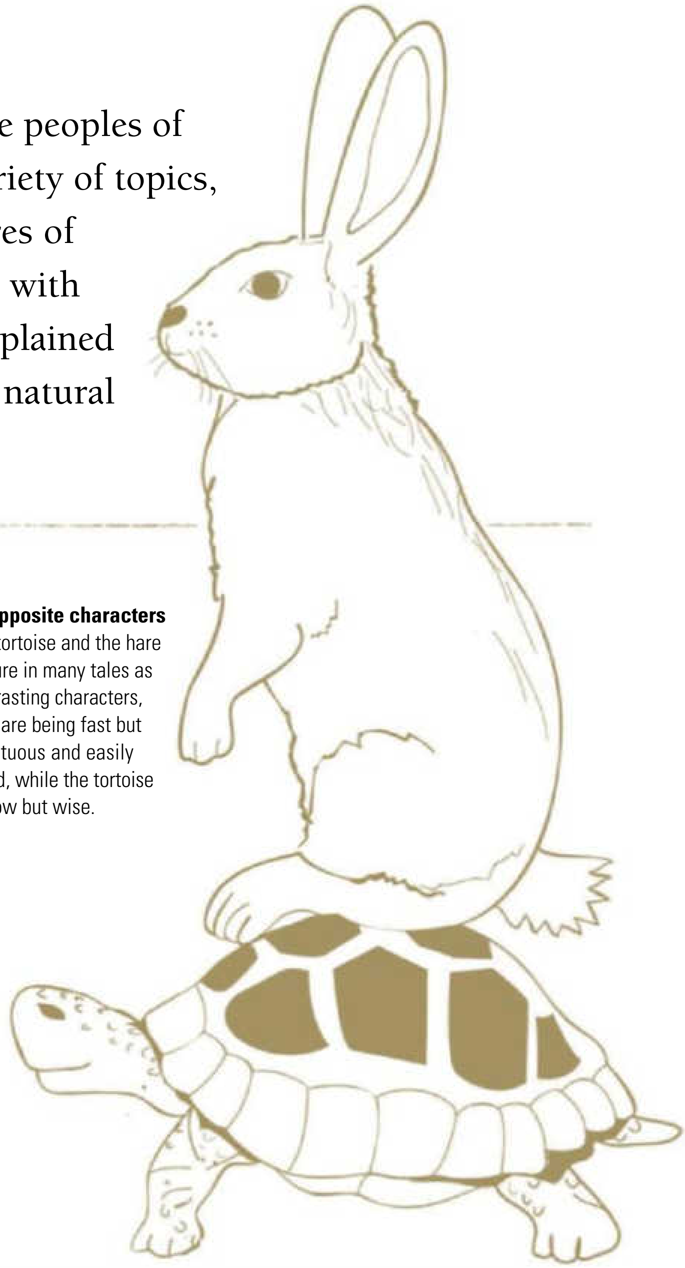
Antelope
Large antelope were often taken by big cats and were also a more likely quarry for huntsmen than leopard cubs.

SOUTHERN AFRICAN FOLK TALES

Storytelling forms an important part of the culture of the peoples of Southern Africa. Legends and folk tales encompass a variety of topics, but abiding themes are the unusual birth and adventures of miraculous "wonder-children" and mythical encounters with animals. Many of these stories combine unusual or unexplained happenings with a firm grounding in the realities of the natural world and everyday life, such as drought and famine.

THE TORTOISE AND THE HARE

There was once a severe shortage of water in the jungle, so all the animals (except for the hare, who could not be bothered) tried to make the water come back. Finally, only the tortoise succeeded, by stamping on the dry riverbed until a pool of water appeared. The animals feared that the lazy and cunning hare would try to steal the water, so they took turns to stand guard over the pool each night. First the hyena stood guard, then the lion, but the hare tricked both of them, and took away a few calabashes of water. Then the tortoise offered to stand guard: he covered his shell with sticky bird lime and hid at the bottom of the pool. When the hare came, he assumed that the water was unguarded. He drank his fill, and then jumped in for a bath. His feet stuck to the tortoise's shell and he remained trapped there until the morning, when all the other animals came to see what had happened, and tied him up as punishment.



▶ **Opposite characters**
The tortoise and the hare feature in many tales as contrasting characters, the hare being fast but impetuous and easily bored, while the tortoise is slow but wise.

BANTU PEOPLES

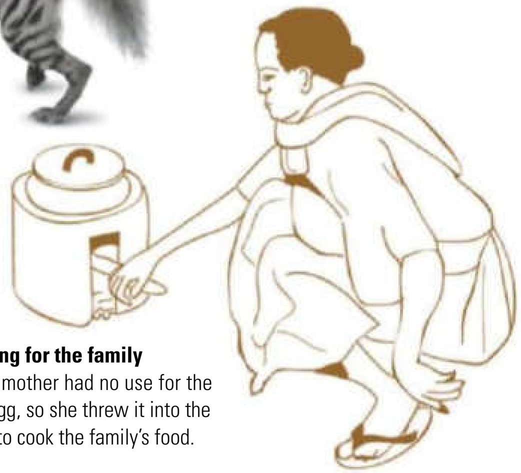
There are some 400 ethnic groups known as Bantu, who speak related languages. They originated in Central and East Africa, but many had migrated southwards by the 11th century. The Southern African groups include the Xhosa and the Zulu, who traditionally made their living by farming and raising cattle. These peoples have a rich tradition of arts and crafts, and a deep store of myths, from creation stories to tales explaining the origin of death.

Bantu artefacts

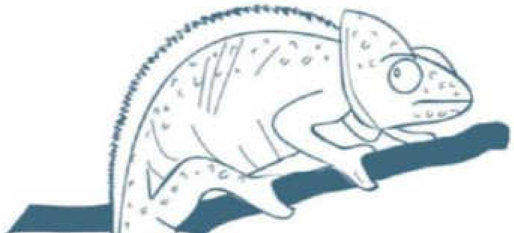
THE EGG CHILD

One day, a girl who was out plucking leaves with her friends found an egg that belonged to a hyena and took it home, but her mother threw it on the fire. Then the hyena came looking for its egg and was angry when the girl's mother explained what she had done. The hyena threatened her, and made her promise to hand over her next child. After that, the hyena waylaid the woman every day, threatening to eat her if she did not give him a child. Then one day the woman noticed a swelling on her shin. This boil grew until it burst and a boy emerged, fully armed and able to walk and talk. He told her he was Kachirambe, the child of the shin bone. When the hyena came to claim him, the wonder child was too swift and clever to be caught. He rounded on the hyena, and killed it.

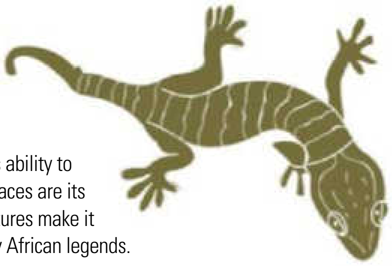
◄ **Hyena**
The hyena's odd appearance links it in Southern African myth with strange events, hence the tale of it laying an egg.



► **Cooking for the family**
The girl's mother had no use for the hyena's egg, so she threw it into the fire used to cook the family's food.



◄ **Chameleon**
A creature that often appears in African myths, the chameleon's slow way of moving is usually highlighted in these stories.



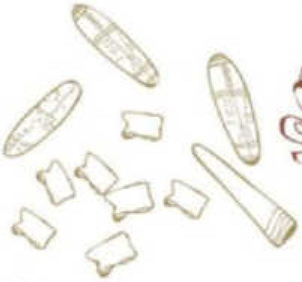
► **Gecko**
The gecko's speed and its ability to travel across vertical surfaces are its key attributes. These features make it a popular subject in many African legends.

THE ARRIVAL OF DEATH

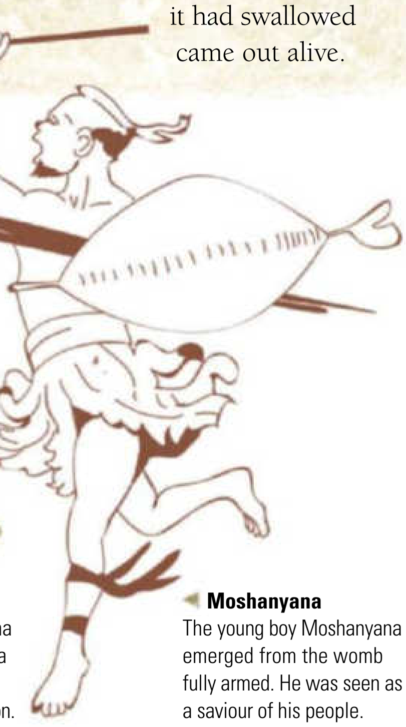
When he created humans, the supreme god decided that they should live forever. He looked for a messenger to deliver this good news to them, and his eye chanced upon the chameleon. But chameleons travel slowly, and the creature was distracted, stopping often on the way for food or to take a nap. After a while the supreme god changed his mind, thinking that it was better for his creations to have a limited life. This time, he chose a different messenger to deliver the news – the fast-moving gecko. There is no overturning a divine command once it has been delivered, so whether people would die or live forever depended on which messenger arrived first. Unfortunately for mankind, the gecko soon overtook the chameleon and gave the people the message that they would not live forever.

THE BOY WARRIOR

Once, a terrible monster rampaged through a Basuto village. It ate all the animals and people except for one pregnant woman who had hidden in an animal pen. Then, swollen with food, the monster got stuck in a mountain pass and could not move. The same day the woman gave birth – not to a baby, but to a fully grown young man. She named her son Moshanyana, meaning "little boy" – Ditaolane, in some versions – and told him what had happened. Immediately he killed the beast, and when he cut open its belly, all the people it had swallowed came out alive.



▲ **Divining charms**
When the wonder-child Moshanyana was born, he was already wearing a necklace made from a collection of bones that could be used for divination.



◄ **Moshanyana**
The young boy Moshanyana emerged from the womb fully armed. He was seen as a saviour of his people.

THE AMERICAS

It is thought that people first came to the Americas over a narrow land bridge that connected Siberia with Alaska before sea levels rose to create the Bering Strait. No one knows for certain when people first made this journey – experts' estimates vary from as long ago as 60,000 BCE to as recently as 10,000 BCE. Whenever it occurred, it must have been a life-changing adventure for those who actually made it. However, it was merely the beginning of a series of even longer journeys that took people southward, some fanning out across North America, others going still further until a few finally reached Tierra del Fuego, at the southernmost tip of South America.

This series of expeditions, no doubt taking place over thousands of years, separated people into myriad tribes who adapted themselves to local conditions all over both continents. In North America alone there were probably at least 2,000 different tribes – but not all have survived. Wars between one tribe and another and, most devastatingly, subjugation by the European settlers who came to North America from the 17th century onwards, have left a mere 300 or so Native North American "nations".

The old lives of Native North American tribes varied greatly. Many lived in small and scattered communities, but some, such as the Pueblo in the south of the continent, gathered in large urban settlements. Many of these people now live on reservations, where small areas of land have been set aside for them, and where they now guard their ancestral cultural heritages with great care. The surviving nations are custodians of a rich hoard of myths, covering a variety of origin stories, a multitude of animal spirits and deities, and numerous nature gods, tricksters, and culture heroes. According to local conditions and development, traditions linked to hunting, agriculture, and warfare all have special prominence in these mythologies.

> WE WILL BE KNOWN FOREVER BY THE TRACKS THAT WE LEAVE.
>
> Dakota proverb

Further south, in the area known historically as Mesoamerica, myths of warfare and sacrifice are especially dominant. Amerindian peoples such as the Maya, Toltecs, and Aztecs each developed impressive cities, monumental buildings, and hierarchical social structures. But they made their most lasting impression through the violence that underpinned their religion, which involved making gruesome human sacrifices – sometimes on a vast scale – to appease their bloodthirsty gods.

Unlike the enduring traditions of North America, these practices have thankfully long vanished, but they have left fascinating remains, from tales of the gods to the stone temples where they were worshipped. Likewise, the Incas and other civilizations of South America have left architectural remains that show their devotion to their gods, especially the sun god Inti, whose image is found both in stone carvings and on stunning gold artefacts.

Travellers from South America also settled on the islands of the Caribbean, and they too had a god who represented, or lived in, the sun. But the Caribbean, perhaps even more than the rest of the Americas, became a melting pot of races and cultures after European contact began in the 15th century. From the point of view of mythology, the greatest impact came from the arrival of Christianity – especially in the form of the Roman Catholic Church – and the influx of slaves from Africa. Among the slaves were many who followed the religions of West Africa. These traditions, mixed with local beliefs and Catholic ideas, symbols, and saints, produced religions such as Voodoo. These beliefs still survive – another of the living traditions of the Americas.

RAVEN STEALS THE LIGHT

One of the most popular figures in North American mythology is Raven, a trickster and culture hero of the people of the northwest coast. He is credited with bringing light into the world because he placed the sun, moon, and stars in the sky, using his trickery and his powers of shape-changing. In certain cultures, he is also said to be the bringer of fire, and the creator or discoverer of the first human beings.

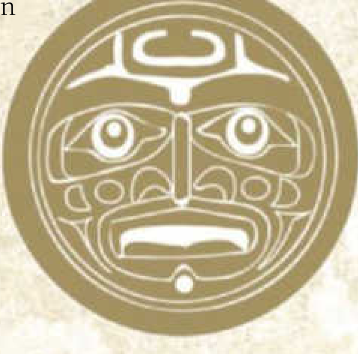
Raven
This wooden rattle was made in the shape of Raven by a Tlingit craftsman; the Tlingit consider Raven a friend of humanity.

THE MYTH

In the beginning, the world was shrouded in complete darkness. This was because all the light in the world was hoarded by the sky chief, who guarded it carefully and kept it concealed within a series of boxes piled in a corner of the house. The old chief was very selfish and did not wish to let the light out. Because of this, the other people in the world could not hunt or fish properly in the dark, and had to grope around for their food. They soon became accustomed to finding their way about using their sense of touch, reaching out for familiar trees as they walked by, and following the ruts left in the ground by those who had passed by earlier. They managed to go about their daily activities well enough, but one particular creature, Raven, was upset with the perpetual darkness. He wanted to be able to find food easily, and was tired of blundering about in the dark, looking for things.

RAVEN'S TRICK

When Raven learned that the light was hidden in the sky chief's house, he hatched a plan to gain access to the house. He decided to be reborn into the chief's family. He knew that the chief's beautiful daughter walked regularly to a spring to fetch water. One day, when Raven heard her approaching the spring, he transformed himself into a pine needle and then let the breeze blow him towards the young woman. He floated into the pail of water she had filled and was carrying home. Halfway home she stopped to rest and took a sip of the water. Raven, in the form of the pine needle, slipped down her throat inconspicuously.

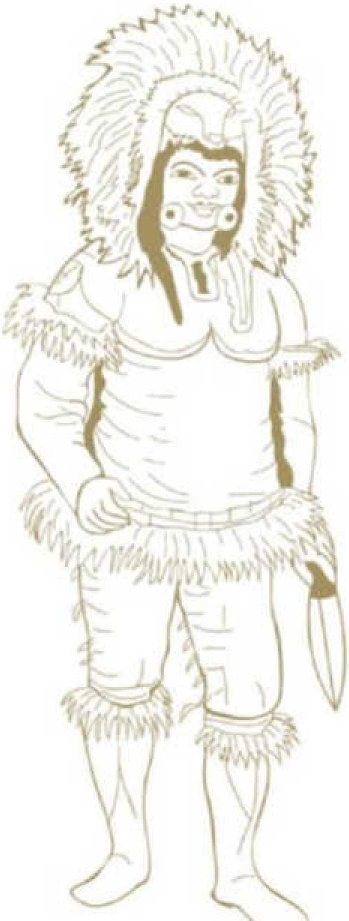


Sun mask
The act of bringing the sun and its warmth to cold northern regions such as Alaska made Raven a popular figure in local myth and folklore.

RAVEN REBORN

With Raven inside her body, the sky chief's daughter became pregnant. When Raven was born as a human child, he had thick black hair and a beak-like nose, and cried harshly like a bird. Soon the infant began to crawl around. The sky chief enjoyed playing with his grandson all day, indulgently giving in to all of his demands. Raven discovered in the course of his explorations that the chief guarded a pile of boxes in the corner carefully. One day, he tried to play with the boxes, and cried insistently when they were taken away. The chief caved in to his demands and gave him the smallest one. When Raven saw the stars inside the box, he took them out and began playing with them happily. Then, before the old man could stop him, he threw them out through the smoke hole of the house, and the stars lodged in the sky.

Afterwards, Raven began crying yet again, and so the chief gave him the second box to calm him down. This box contained the moon, and Raven gleefully bounced it about like a ball for a while, until it too flew out through the smoke hole and into the sky. Finally, still unaware of the real identity of Raven, the chief gave the wailing child the largest box in the set, which contained the sun. This time, Raven transformed back into a bird, took the sun in his beak, and flew up into the sky. The world finally became flooded with bright daylight, but the sky chief and his daughter never saw the child again.



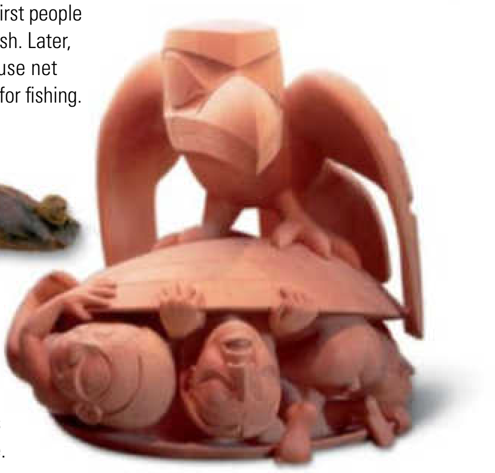
THE CHILDHOOD OF RAVEN

All versions of the myth feature Raven as a demanding child, with an indulgent grandfather who lets him play with his secret sources of light. Some accounts narrate how Raven waited impatiently to resume his true form, and when he saw the family busy feasting, he grabbed his chance. Transforming back into a bird, he snatched the ball of light and flew away. In another variation, the stars were hidden in a bag. Raven, who still had his sharp beak, pecked through the bag, letting the stars out to light up the sky.

Sky chief
Raven's grandfather, the old sky chief, was an ambiguous figure. He guarded the sources of light jealously, but let his grandson play with them.

Kelp
After giving light to the world, Raven descended to the ocean floor on a ladder made of kelp. He found the sea creatures to be similar to those on land.

Fishing net floats
Raven taught the first people how to hunt and fish. Later, they learned to use net floats like these for fishing.



The first people
In one Haida myth, Raven saw the first humans cowering in a giant clam. With his smooth talking, he cajoled them to emerge.

RAVEN AND CREATION

For many tribes of North America such as the Haida, Raven is a creator entity. One story describes how Raven flew over the ocean carrying pebbles in his beak. With these pebbles he made the stars and planets. Then he beat his wings to make a great wind that blew river beds and valleys into existence, building mountains at the same time. The ground was fertilized by his droppings. Finally, Raven either created the first humans or watched them emerge into the world.

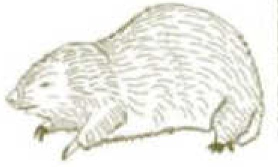
TRICKSTER RAVEN COAXED THE CREATURES TO COME OUT. THESE LITTLE DWELLERS WERE THE ORIGINAL HAIDA.

SEEKERS OF FIRE

A story from the Queen Charlotte Islands, on the Canadian coast, tells how Raven was once white. He befriended the daughter of Chief Grey Eagle – the guardian of the sun, moon, and fire – and stole his precious hoard. He flew around the sky, putting the sun and moon in place, while carrying a brand of fire in his beak. The smoke blackened his feathers, and when the fire grew too hot, Raven dropped it on some rocks. This is why fire appears when two rocks are struck together.

Robin
The North American robin was yet another bird associated with the bringing of fire, carrying evidence of the bright flames on its red breast.

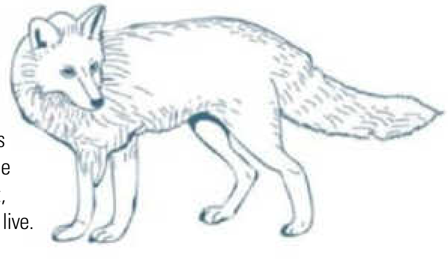
Mole
The mole was one of the creatures who failed to find or steal fire in some North American myths.



THE GIVER OF LIFE

Like Raven, different animals and birds play a role in human destiny. They are linked with life and death, which are represented by objects that float or sink when dropped into water. In a version told by the Tlingit people, the fox, who is an ancestor figure, drops some sticks of rhubarb into the sea. The rhubarb floats, and the fox takes this as a sign that humanity will live.

Buzzard
A North American myth tells of a buzzard who threw a rock in the sea; it washed ashore after sinking, making life possible.



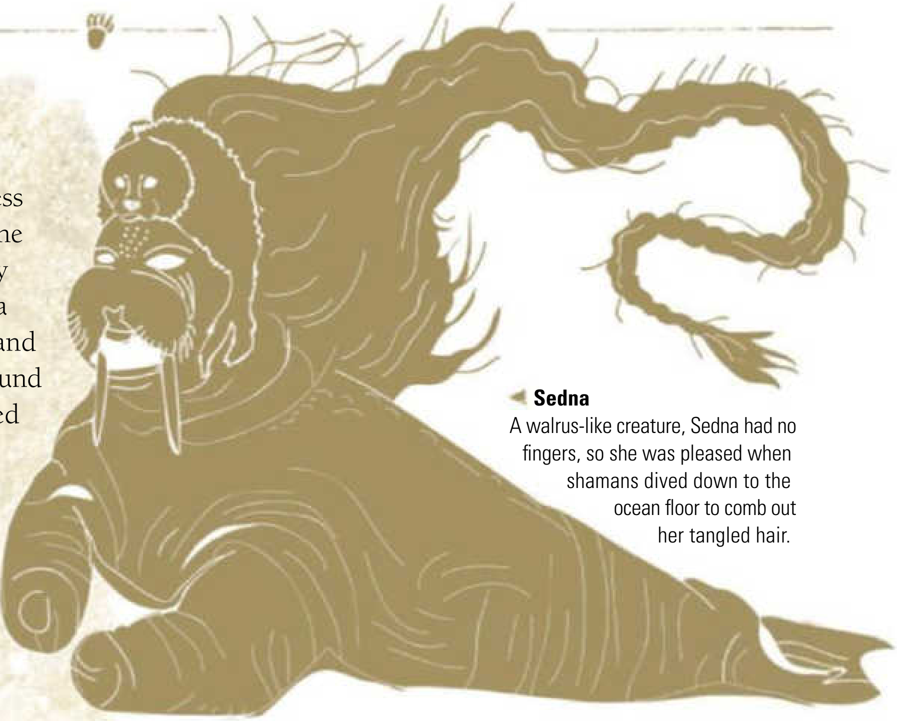
Fox
Being well-disposed towards humans, the fox hoped that the sticks of rhubarb would float, signifying that humanity would live.

MYTHS OF THE FAR NORTH

The people of the northernmost region of North America traditionally lived by hunting and fishing in the cold Arctic seas. Their myths, therefore, feature stories of the sea and its deities, including tales explaining the origins of sea animals and the fluctuations in the availability of creatures such as fish, seals, walruses, and whales. Many spirits figure in these myths; among peoples such as the Inuit, shamans were said to be able to communicate with them, often with the help of Inua, spirit helpers who took animal form.

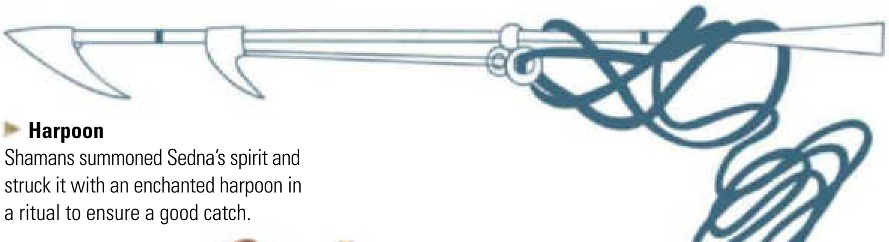
THE SEA GODDESS

Sedna, also known as the Sea Woman, was the goddess of the sea. She whipped up storms, and influenced the migration of birds and animals. Sedna was originally a beautiful girl with long flowing hair. She married a young man, who promised to give her fur blankets and good food every day. But on reaching his home, she found out that he was a bird-man in disguise. He mistreated her, and when Sedna's father found out, he killed her husband and took her away in his kayak. But the spirit of the bird-man raised a great storm, and in order to appease the angry spirit, Sedna's father threw her overboard. He stopped her from climbing back into the kayak by cutting off her fingers, which then became the first sea creatures. Sedna sank to the ocean floor and became a sea goddess.

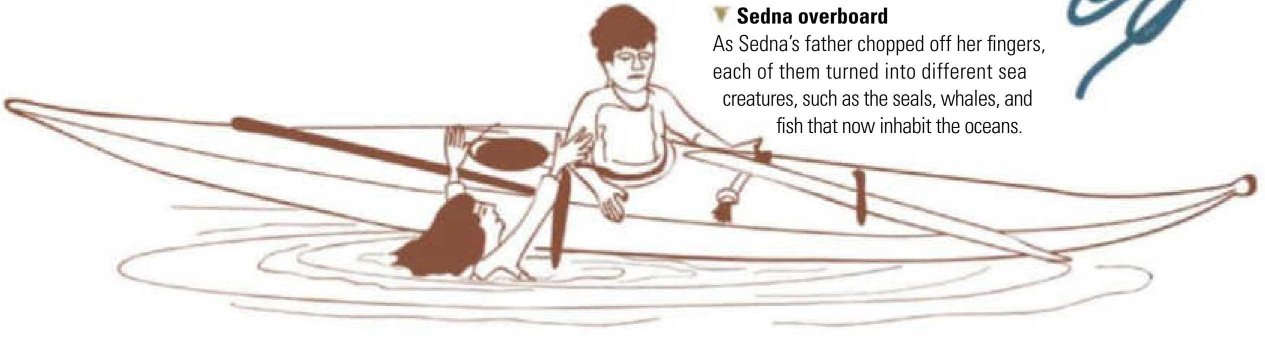


◄ **Sedna**
A walrus-like creature, Sedna had no fingers, so she was pleased when shamans dived down to the ocean floor to comb out her tangled hair.

◄ **Seal-shaped artefact**
One of Sedna's gifts to the Inuit, the seal supplied meat, skins, and blubber. Inuit craftsmen carved artefacts shaped like seals, such as this one in the shape of a seal rising to the surface.



► **Harpoon**
Shamans summoned Sedna's spirit and struck it with an enchanted harpoon in a ritual to ensure a good catch.

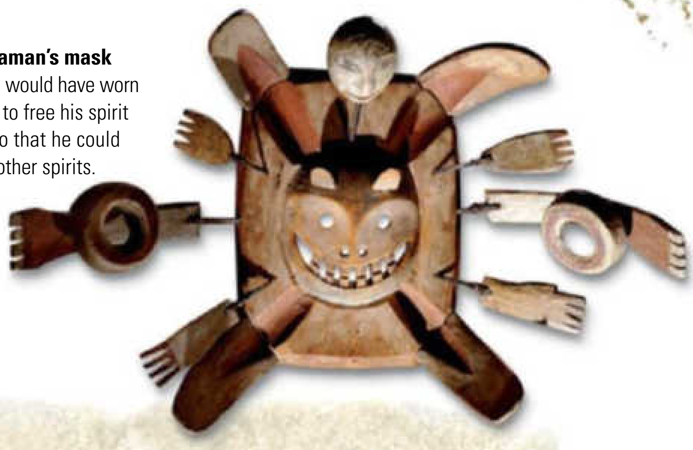


▼ **Sedna overboard**
As Sedna's father chopped off her fingers, each of them turned into different sea creatures, such as the seals, whales, and fish that now inhabit the oceans.

THE SUN PERSON

The spirit of the sun began life as a young woman who was abused by her brother. In deep distress, she mutilated herself and then went to live as far away from her cruel brother as she could. She took up residence high in the sky, where she became known as the Sun Person. There she appeared every morning, often taking on an orange colour, with streaks that represented her dreadful wounds. Undeterred, her brother turned into the moon and chased her across the sky, trying in vain to capture her, thereby causing the alternate appearance of the sun and moon in the heavens. People were sorry for the way the Sun Person had been treated, but mothers also saw her as a valuable source of energy in their cold homeland, and would expose their infants to her warm rays.

Wounded sun
The orange sun, which often creates a blotchy colour in the Arctic sky, reminded people of the wounds of the Sun Person. The Inuit believed that the sun's warmth would infuse strength into their children's limbs, making them swift runners and nimble hunters.



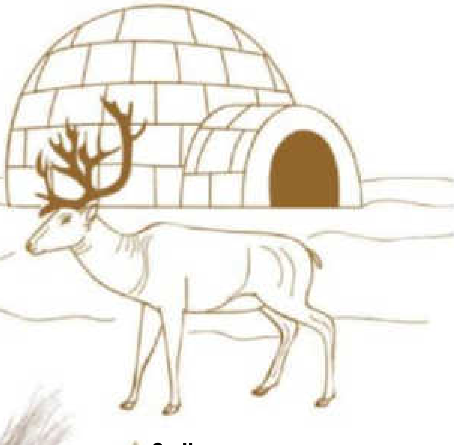
Alaskan shaman's mask
The boy shaman would have worn a mask like this to free his spirit from his body so that he could commune with other spirits.

THE BOY SHAMAN

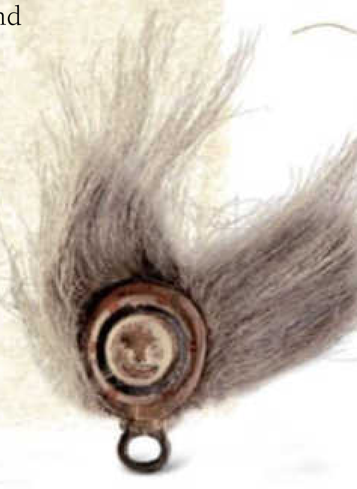
The myths of the Gwich'in of Alaska tell of a poor boy who had the powers of a shaman. For some time, he used his powers to bring his tribe plentiful food. He also ensured that they were always well supplied with caribou, which provided them with meat to eat and skins to make clothes and tents. But one day the boy shaman made a momentous announcement. He told his mother that he was travelling to the sky. He said to her that she should look for him on the moon, and that she would be able to tell merely by looking at him what the prospects were for the food supply on Earth. If she saw him upright or bending backwards, there would be food aplenty for the people. Then they should share their food with the old and helpless. But if he was bent forwards, they should expect that caribou would not be very plentiful, so they should build up their stores.

ALIGNAQ

The guilty brother of the Sun Person (*see above*) was called Alignaq. After turning into the moon, he continued his lustful pursuit of his sister, giving up eating, and hence growing thinner and thinner. Then he disappeared for three days to eat his fill, before returning to chase his sister again. This is why the moon waxes and wanes. As the moon god, Alignaq also ruled the weather and the tides. He lived in a large igloo on the moon, along with the souls of game animals such as the caribou. The souls of the land animals lived inside his igloo, while those of the sea creatures, such as seals and walruses, swam in a vast tub of water that he kept outside his door. Most of the time Alignaq wandered the sky on his celestial hunting expeditions, keeping a close eye on human behaviour. If people did evil, he withheld game from them until they mended their ways.



Caribou
The Inuit believed that even animals had souls, so they needed to be appeased after being killed. The souls of dead game animals resided with Alignaq.



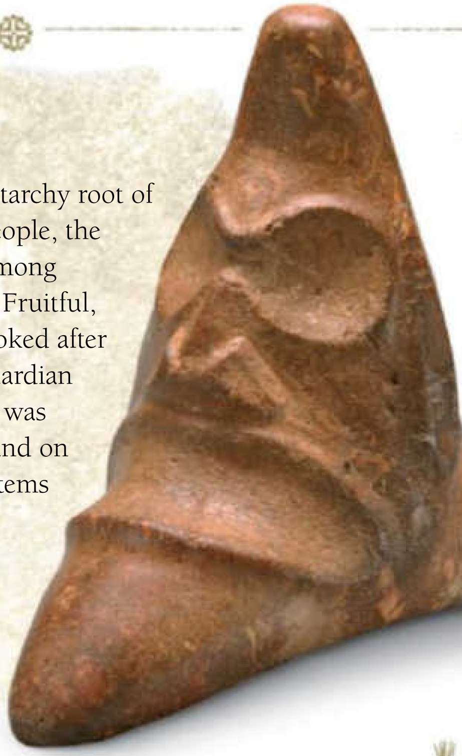
Moon spirit
This finger mask, made of wood and polar bear hair, was worn by Alaskan women during dances. It represented Alignaq, the spirit of the moon.

GODS AND SPIRITS

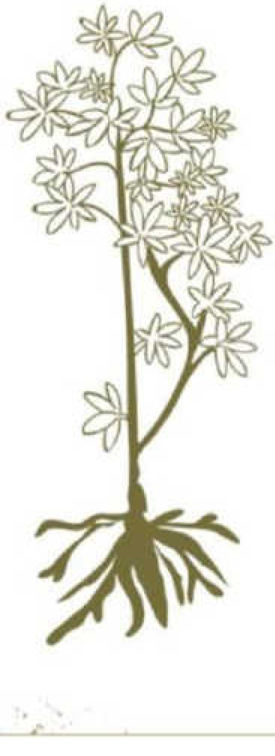
The Taíno lived in the Greater Antilles and the Bahamas in the centuries before the arrival of the European settlers in the Caribbean. These people were the rivals of the Caribs, who lived mainly in the Lesser Antilles. Although the occupations of the Taíno included hunting and fishing, they also developed agriculture and grew both corn and the cassava plant. Their religion involved the worship of spirits, gods, and ancestors. Especially prominent were the deities who presided over the fertility of the soil and the growth of crops. Many of their myths were perpetuated through ceremonial dances and oral retellings.

YÚCAHU

The staple food in the Caribbean was the cassava plant, the starchy root of which was widely eaten. Of all the gods of the indigenous people, the most powerful were those who helped cassava to flourish. Among these deities, Yúcahu was the most important. Known as the Fruitful, Yúcahu was a god of the sea, as well as a fertility god who looked after the crops and made them grow. In addition, he was also a guardian deity, who watched over people and protected them. Yúcahu was seen as having a triangular form with his face in the centre, and on some images of the god there were patterns resembling the stems and foliage of plants. People made carvings of the deity that they buried in the fields, pouring offerings of water on the soil where the image was interred. This action of pouring the water "fertilized" the image, which in turn spread Yúcahu's growth-bringing powers to the fields.

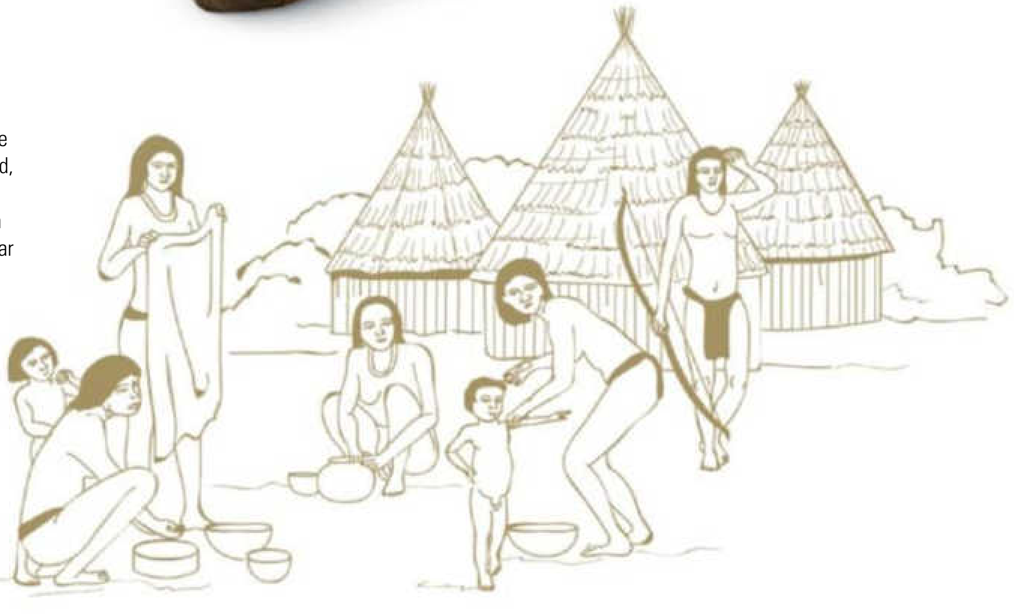


◄ **Three-pointed stone**
Images of Yúcahu in the form of three-pointed stones have been found in the Caribbean. These were often buried as offerings. Sometimes the top of the deity's head was shaped like a nipple.

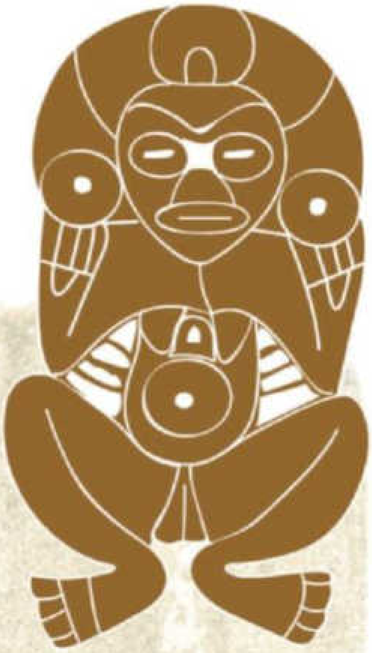


◄ **Cassava**
The cassava plant is known in the Caribbean as yuca. It can be boiled, or made into bread. The three-pointed image of Yúcahu is often thought to represent the triangular shape of the cassava tuber.

► **Taíno people**
The Taíno lived in villages of circular thatched houses. They grew their crops on large mounds of soil called *conucos*, which were said to be an invention of Yúcahu.



Mother goddess
The squatting position of Atabey is similar to the pose adopted by women during childbirth in many societies. She was a symbol of maternity, and her images were passed over pregnant women to spare them misfortune.

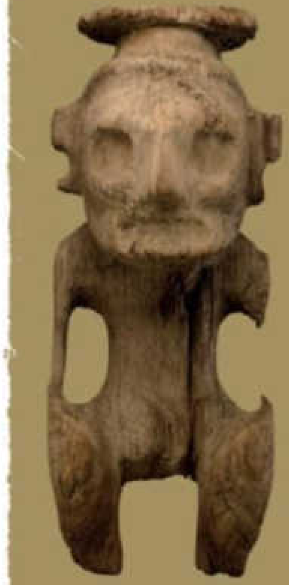


ATABEY

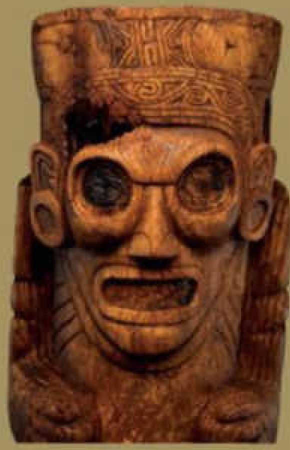
The goddess Atabey was the mother of the great god Yúcahu, and like her son, she was a fertility deity. Atabey was the goddess of the Earth, the mother goddess, and the deity who presided over the lakes and rivers. As a bringer of rain, she was sometimes attended by her messenger, Guatauva, and the goddess of the floods, Coatrischie. She was often portrayed in a squatting pose. In this position, her legs were bent double like those of a frog, a creature with which she was frequently associated. Frogs call loudly during their mating season, which coincides with the start of the tropical rainy season, the part of the year when the new cassava crop has just been planted. All these factors established a natural link between the frog and the goddess, who was said to preside over both the fertility of the soil and the fresh waters.

ZEMI IMAGES

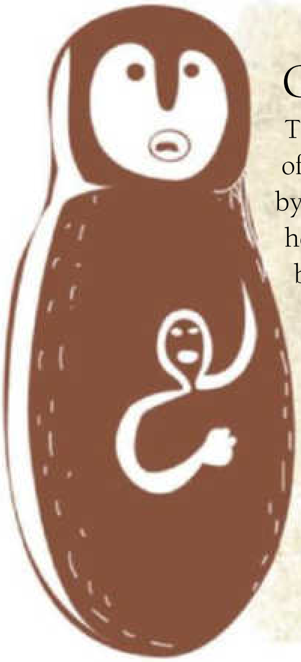
The images used in Taíno worship were known as the *zemi*; they were seen not just as statuettes but as embodiments of the gods. These images represented the whole range of deities, from high gods such as Yúcahu, who were worshipped by everyone, to family ancestors known only to their descendants. Often arranged in a hierarchy, the *zemi* were used in many different ways – in public ceremonies at sacred sites such as caves, and in private worship at home, where they would be set on altars. Devotees made offerings to the *zemi* in the form of libations, sang songs in their honour, and spoke to them in prayer or supplication.



Wooden statuette
It was sometimes said that the spirit of a tree would "ask" devotees to give it physical form by carving its wood into a ritual statuette or *zemi*.



Face of a spirit
Many of the *zemi* depict unknown spirits. They probably represented ancestors who formed an important focus of worship for their families.



GUABANCEX

The Taíno saw the Caribbean weather patterns as evidence of the ascendancy of different deities. The rains were brought by the god Boinayel (Son of the Grey Serpent), who was heralded by the dark rain clouds across the sky. But he was balanced by his brother Márohu, the god of the clear skies, who ensured fair weather. Occasionally, this climatic harmony was broken by the mighty anger of Guabancex, the goddess of storms and bringer of hurricanes. She shattered the calm and, when the deities Guatauva and Coatrischie joined her, she was unstoppable.

The goddess of hurricanes
Images of the goddess Guabancex show her limbs curving in opposite directions. This pattern is seen as representing the snaking path that a hurricane can take across the landscape.

The angry goddess
The devastating winds caused by hurricanes were a regular part of life in the Caribbean. Life for the islanders was put on hold until the anger of Guabancex, the Lady of the Winds, blew itself out.

GHEDE

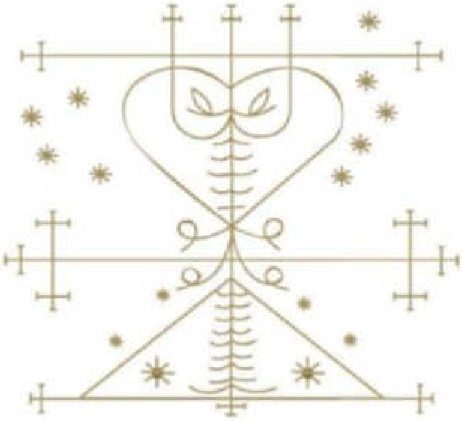
Ghede was an ancient Haitian god of love, sex, and fertility. In Haitian voodoo, Ghede is the god of death, as well as the name for a group of spirits who represent both death and fertility. The concept of the "loa" is essential to voodoo culture. The loa are important ancestral spirits who symbolize and influence specific aspects of the natural world. They include the spirit known as Baron, who, according to different voodoo traditions, is either the leader of the spirits or an aspect of Ghede. All these spirits are the focus of a number of Haitian beliefs and rituals concerning the opposite – but linked – themes of death and sexuality.

GHEDE AND SEXUALITY

As a spirit of sexuality, Ghede regards sex as something inevitable, not a matter of good or evil. He has a rapacious sexual appetite, which is mirrored by a healthy craving for food and alcohol, aspects of his character that serve to emphasize the earthy and high-living side of this spirit. Ghede likes to engage in explicit sexual conversation, and holds up for ridicule or embarrassment those people who try to suppress their sexual feelings, or who generally tend to adopt a repressed attitude to sex. He frequently makes erotic jokes and flaunts his sexuality without any inhibition. He is also an embodiment of resurrection and life energy, hence he has potent healing powers, which are believed to be especially effective on children. The sophisticated and stylish Ghede is closely linked to his bumbling, peasant-like younger brother, Azacca, the spirit of agriculture and the patron of farmers, whose ceremonies he often attends.

Followers of Ghede
Ghede is believed to enjoy dancing, and his dance is fast and expressive. During festivals held in Ghede's honour, such as the Day of the Dead, his followers dance in abandon, often swept up into an ecstatic trance.

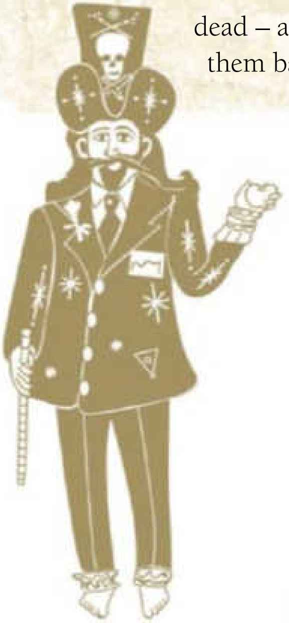
Black rooster, symbol of Ghede's consort
Ghede is a spirit of death and fertility, and offerings to the god include black roosters, candles, miniature coffins, and sequined bottles containing rum. The black rooster is also one of the symbols of Maman Brigitte, who is Ghede's consort.



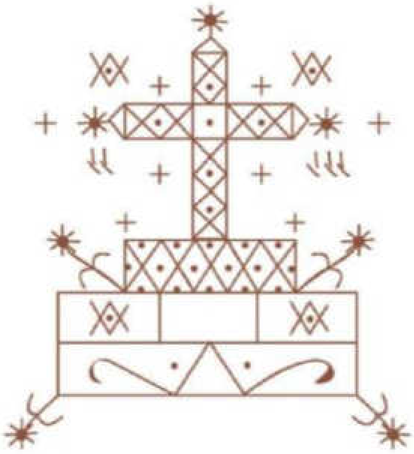
Maman Brigitte's sign
Like Ghede, Maman Brigitte has a strong sexual appetite. In voodoo rituals, designs known as *vevers* are drawn on the earth to invoke the gods. Maman Brigitte's *vever* incorporates a heart and crosses.

BARON SAMEDI

Baron Samedi is the most familiar aspect of the ancestral spirit, or loa, known as Baron, other incarnations being Baron La Croix and Baron Cimetière. Baron is seen by different traditions as the chief of the Ghede spirits, or as their father, or as the personification of the spirit known as Ghede. He is often portrayed as an elegant figure with a white or skull-like face, black clothes, a white top hat, and dark glasses. He smokes a cigarette in a long holder and carries a cane. Baron Samedi is a "psychopomp", a being who is able to communicate between the worlds of both humans and spirits. He leads the souls of the dead to the Underworld. He is also said to control the zombies – the soulless bodies of the dead – and possesses the power to bring them back to life by restoring their souls.



Baron Samedi
Baron Samedi is portrayed in various ways. Sometimes he wears a large, elaborate hat with the image of a human skull on the front.



Baron Samedi's symbol
Voodoo is a mix of African, Caribbean, and Roman Catholic beliefs, and the cross is prominent in Baron Samedi's *vever*, since he is associated with death.

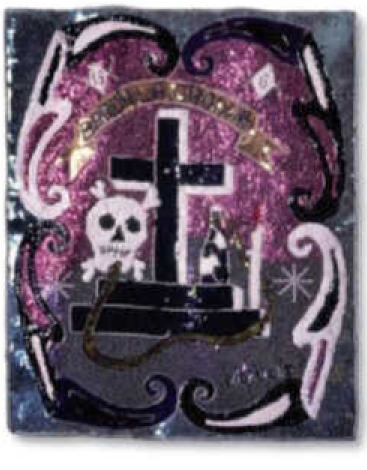
Tarot cards
Originating in medieval Italy, the tarot pack is used for divination and probably came to the Caribbean with the early European settlers. Ghede often dispensed advice through tarot cards.

GHEDE AND DIVINATION

The traditional haunt of Ghede is the crossroads, symbolic of the place where the worlds of the living and dead, of people and spirits, come together. As the spirit who presides over this meeting place, Ghede is believed to have special powers of prophecy and the gift of second sight. People therefore come to the spirit seeking answers to pressing questions, especially those concerning fertility. They make an offering to the spirit and request a priest to ask Ghede questions. The answer comes back in the form of a pattern of drops of rum trickled onto the ground, or in the form of cryptic messages from rolls of a dice or the turning of particular tarot cards. The advice that the spirit gives may often be unpalatable to the supplicants; nevertheless, they believe it to be sound, and give it great respect.

GHEDE SPIRITS

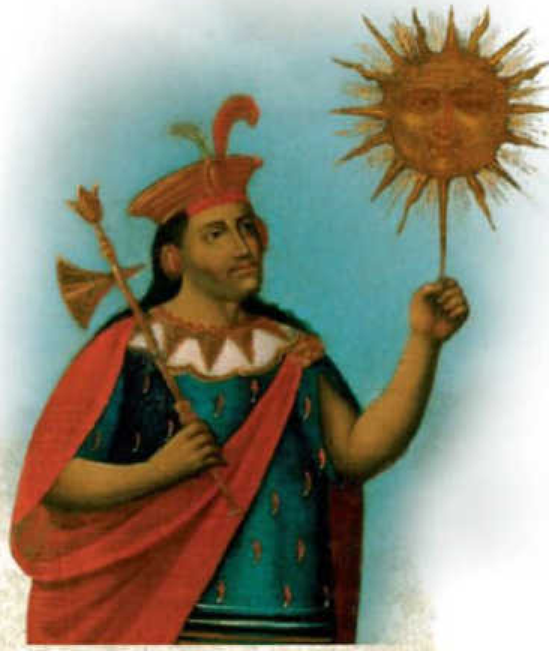
Ghede is also the name for a group of spirits who perform different functions as psychopomp and mediator between the worlds of the living and the dead. They are easily accessible to devotees, and ready with their advice. These spirits have distinct characters and roles. For example, Ghede Nibo takes the form of a young man who died early, perhaps as a result of violence; he is considered to be a guardian of tombs and a protector of people who die young. Ghede Ti Malis is a trickster spirit, whose pranks include tricking people out of food.



Voodoo flag
Among the objects that are considered essential for voodoo rituals is a sequined flag depicting symbols of Ghede. The unfurling of this flag signals the formal start of the ceremony.

INCA BEGINNINGS

In the centuries preceding the Spanish conquest of Peru in the 16th century, the Incas built a vast empire in the Andes mountains of western South America. They had a sophisticated oral culture, and their mythology tells many different tales of their origin, all of which feature an ancestor called Manco Capac who, together with a number of followers, emerges into the world from a cave.



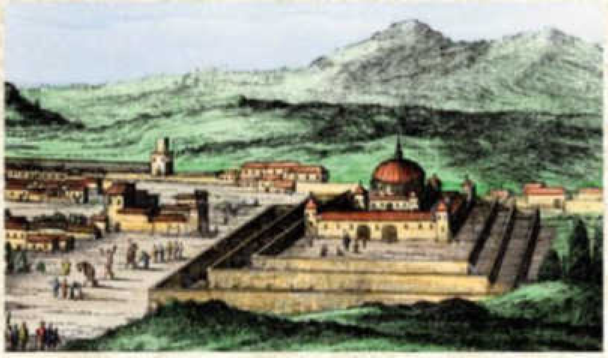
Manco Capac
Like all Incan rulers, Manco Capac was always associated with the sun. Some said he wore a cape of gold during his arrival ceremony in Cuzco.

THE MYTH

The Incan creator god, called Con Tiki Viracocha, or simply Viracocha, was one of the most important deities in Incan mythology. In most versions of the creation story, he emerged from the waters of Lake Titicaca to create a race of giants. But he was dissatisfied with these creatures, and so he brought about a great flood called *Unu Pachacuti* that drowned them. Subsequently, he created the first humans out of pebbles that he found beside the lake. He gave these people a variety of languages, costumes, and foods, and then spread them around the world; though some say that Viracocha sent the first humans to a cave to await the appropriate time for emergence. It was believed by some that the cave was at a place called Pacaritambo (Tavern of the Dawn), which is about 25km (16 miles) southwest of modern-day Cuzco. Others believed that the real name of the place was Tambotocco (Tavern of the Windows), because the people had made three ceremonial entrances to the natural cavern.

THE EMERGENCE

Chief among the Andeans was a man called Manco Capac, who dwelt in the cave with his three brothers and three sisters. One of his sisters, Mama Ocllo, was also his wife. Together, they constituted the Incan royal family and became the ancestors of the Incan rulers who followed them. Eventually, a small group of people representing Incan nobility came out of the cave through one of its entrances. A number of people representing the lower classes of peasants and slaves emerged from the other two entrances to the cave. Then the first Incan settlements were established.



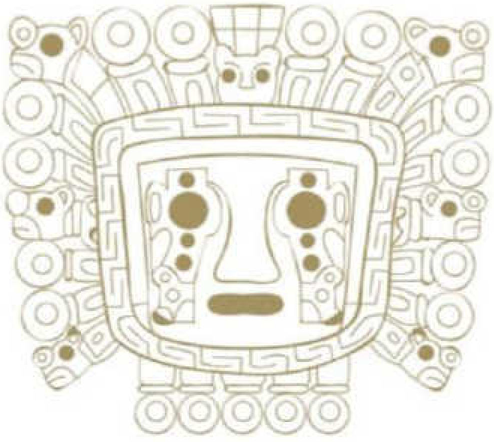
Cuzco
The Peruvian city of Cuzco was the Incan capital. Second only to Lake Titicaca, Cuzco and its neighbourhood was the most important area in Incan religion, with a number of shrines and sacred sites.

THE PEOPLE AND THE SUN GOD

Some chroniclers of the origin myth told a different version of the story. They said that Manco Capac and the other Incas had been set down by the sun god Inti, on the shores of Lake Titicaca. The deity gave Manco Capac a staff or rod of gold and instructed the people to travel around the region, advising them to plunge the gold rod into the ground whenever they stopped to eat or rest. Inti told them that after travelling for a while, they would arrive at a place where the staff would vanish completely into the ground on being plunged. This would indicate that the soil at that location was deep and fertile, and Inti told Manco Capac to build a grand city at that site. The people followed the sun god's commands and after having wandered for some time, they reached a place where the rod disappeared from view into the ground. The Incas built their capital city of Cuzco not far from this spot, and Manco Capac became the first ruler of the Incan kingdom. Thus began the Incan dynasty.

VIRACOCHA

The Incas believed that after creating humans, Viracocha stayed back to watch over them. The deity disguised himself as a beggar and wandered among the Incas to work miracles, and to teach his people how to live. But most humans did not listen to what the god had told them, and he returned from his trip to Earth in tears. He thought that one day his tears would cause another flood that would destroy all of humanity. This is why masks depicting Viracocha often show tears descending from the god's eyes.

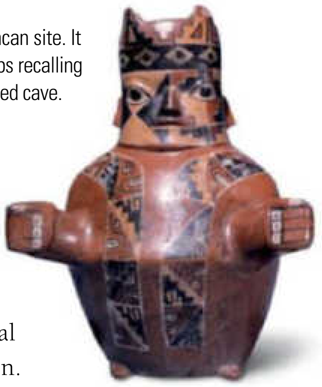


Viracocha gold mask

Quipu
The Incas used a device called a quipu, made of lengths of knotted string or leather, to keep records and accounts.

Machu Picchu
This mountaintop city is an impressive Incan site. It has a temple with three windows, perhaps recalling the Incan emergence from a three-mouthed cave.

Incan pot
Anthropomorphic pots, brightly glazed and sometimes depicting the heads of deities, were common in Incan pottery.



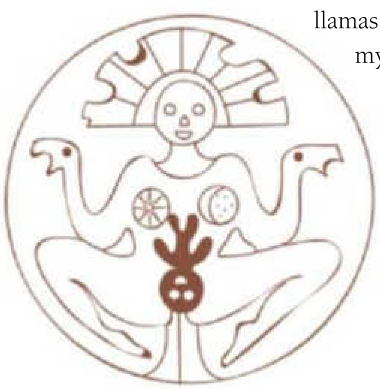
THE INCAS

Although they did not develop the wheel or a conventional system of writing, the Incas had a sophisticated civilization. Their craftsmen excelled in textiles and pottery, and the Incas were master builders too, constructing stone buildings with walls that fitted together without mortar. The long network of roads built across their Andean territories ensured that the Incas could develop a system of communication to hold the empire together. Their myths acknowledge both their humble beginnings at Lake Titicaca and their aspiration to create a vast empire beneath the rays of the sun god Inti.

PACA MAMA IS MOTHER EARTH, TO WHOM WE ALL MUST RETURN SOME DAY.

DEITIES OF THE SEA AND THE EARTH

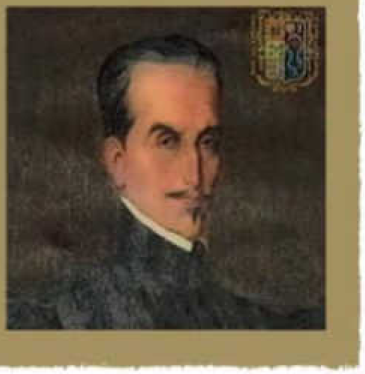
In Incan mythology, the sea and the Earth were actually two goddesses. The sea was Mama Cocha (Sea Mother), who was the patron of fishermen and sailors. The Earth was Paca Mama (Earth Mother), who was a very important Incan deity; she was the consort of the sun god Inti, and the people sacrificed llamas in her honour. Some stories in later Incan mythology describe how Paca Mama was married to Pachacamac, the god of fire and rain, and together they created the stars, the sun, the moon, and the world.



Paca Mama
The Earth goddess was seen as a fertility figure and portrayed as a naked woman. A ritualistic sacrifice of her creature, the llama, was made before the Incas first entered Cuzco.

GARCILASO DE LA VEGA

The son of a Spanish conquistador and an Incan princess, Garcilaso de la Vega (1539–1616) spent most of his adult life in Spain, but staunchly defended the culture of his mother's people. In 1609, he published the *Royal Commentaries*, in which he described the Incan culture and way of life; a second volume eight years later told the story of the Spanish conquest of the Incas. His portrayal of Incan life is invaluable because it comes from first-hand knowledge, though his account of the Incan religious beliefs and practices seems to have been distorted by his Christian outlook.



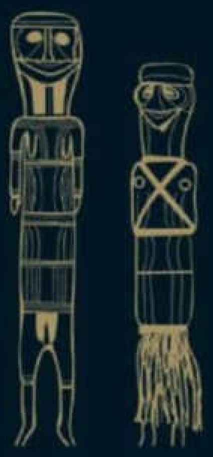
Garcilaso de la Vega

OCEANIA

Oceania is made up of Australia and the islands to its north and east. Spread over an enormous geographical area, these lands have produced four distinct cultural zones: Australia itself; Melanesia, which consists of the island of New Guinea and a string of smaller islands and volcanic archipelagos such as the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides; Micronesia, which consists of the island groups north of New Guinea; and the vast and thinly scattered islands of Polynesia, which occupy the triangle bounded by New Zealand, Hawaii, and Easter Island.

Australia is home to many Aboriginal tribes with distinct languages and cultures. Despite the variety of their traditions and beliefs, there is a common pattern of a remote sky god and a number of other deities who act as ancestor spirits or culture heroes – beings who long ago travelled over the land, creating its features, making the first humans, and teaching people how to live. The travels of these ancestral beings make the land sacred and therefore central to Aboriginal beliefs, and are remembered and relived in rituals and art.

The scattered islands of Oceania are home to many different myths. In Melanesia, for example, the Earth has traditionally been seen as always existing. Supernatural spirits – who altered the form of the world to give it its present shape – and ancestor spirits alike have historically been worshipped and held in awe for their possession of a mystical power known as *mana*. *Mana* explains everything that seems outside the control of humankind or the normal natural processes of the world. Natural and supernatural power are, moreover, often interdependent. In the Caroline Islands, spirits known as *ani* combine the roles of ancestors and gods and have traditionally been seen as dwelling in the bodies of specific beings – such as birds, fish, animals, and trees.



> THE PACIFIC'S SPIRITUAL WORLD IS AS MULTICOLOURED AS ITS CORAL REEFS OR THE FLORA OF ITS COASTS, WHERE OVER A THOUSAND DIFFERENT LANGUAGES ARE SPOKEN.
>
> Jan Knappert, *Pacific Mythology*, 1992

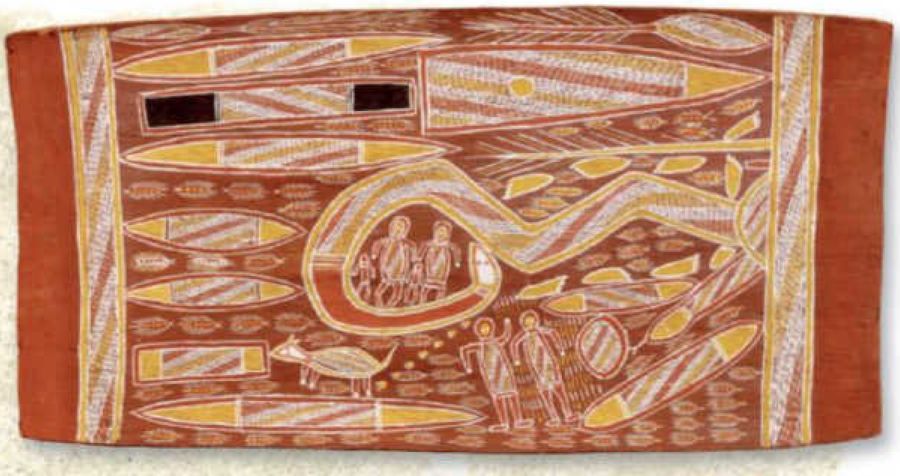
The mythology of the many diverse islands of Polynesia is complex, but remarkably unified, reflecting what were probably relatively recent migrations from one island or group of islands to another. The islands have large pantheons and complex stories. The creation story of New Zealand, for example, features a god, Rangi, who has to be separated from his partner – Papa, the Earth mother – and forced into the sky. Their offspring are then free to have children, and so the large pantheon grows, followed by the creation of humankind and a familiar story of female sin and transgression. The peoples of Polynesia – maritime peoples whose ancestors must have voyaged far across unknown waters – also tell myths involving fantastic journeys across the cosmos. Their Underworld is often seen as a pit where the souls of the dead are sent after death – unless they are the souls of heroes, in which case they are admitted to a paradise in the sky, which they share with the gods. For these island peoples, the gods are everywhere – below the Earth, above it, and across the boundless sea.

THE PRIMAL SISTERS

A widespread Aboriginal myth from Australia describes a pair of ancestral sisters, often known as the Wawilak or Wagilag Sisters, who travel across Arnhem Land. They have a traumatic encounter with the Rainbow Snake, seen as a conflict between the male and female entities, which culminates in the snake swallowing the women. The sisters survive, however, and finally escape the snake's stomach to coexist with their arch rival, reinforcing the idea that both male and female forces are needed for creation to be balanced.

THE MYTH

One day, two women walked out of the ocean and stepped onto the shore of Arnhem Land, in Australia's Northern Territory. They were sisters and the elder one was carrying a baby, while the other one was pregnant. The sisters walked inland looking for animals to eat. Both carried spears and were proficient in their use. The sisters were creators, and as they travelled, they gave names and shapes to the landscapes through which they walked – essentially bringing them into existence. They made steady progress until the pregnant sister began to feel apprehensive about her impending delivery. So the sisters set up camp and lit a fire by a water hole at a place called Mirrirmina.



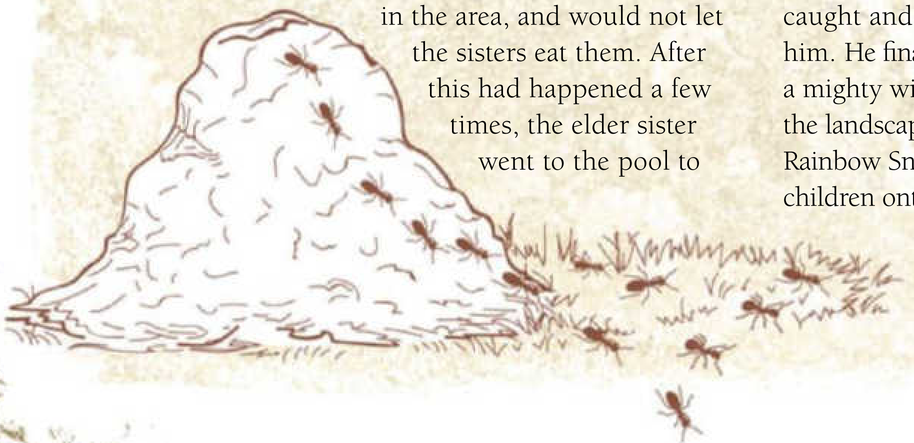
The sisters
The Rainbow Snake encircles the two women, along with their children, in the centrepiece of this painting depicting the myth about the primal sisters.

THE RAINBOW SNAKE'S CREATURES

The elder sister went to hunt for food, while the younger sister lay still and eventually gave birth. But something strange happened when the elder sister came back and began to prepare a meal. All the animals that she had caught and killed leapt out of the cooking pot, ran off, and jumped into the water hole. The sisters did not know that the pool was home to the Rainbow Snake. He owned all the animals in the area, and would not let the sisters eat them. After this had happened a few times, the elder sister went to the pool to investigate. The Rainbow Snake heard her coming and was at last roused from his sleep. He reared up and attacked the two women who had invaded his land, and he swallowed both the sisters and their children.

THE SISTERS RETURN

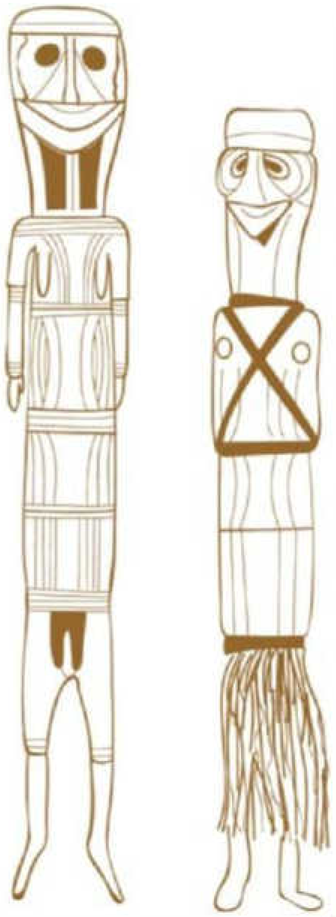
The Rainbow Snake made a lot of noise doing this; his commotion roused all the other snakes, who asked him what was going on. At first he lied, saying that he had caught and eaten a kangaroo, but they did not believe him. He finally admitted to eating the sisters. Immediately, a mighty wind blew and a monsoon lashed its way across the landscape. The rain and wind were so powerful that the Rainbow Snake was forced to vomit up the sisters and their children onto an ant hill, where they were returned to life.



Ant hill
When the Rainbow Snake vomited the sisters onto the ant hill, the painful and repeated bites of the ants brought the women and their children quickly back to life.

WAWILAK SISTERS

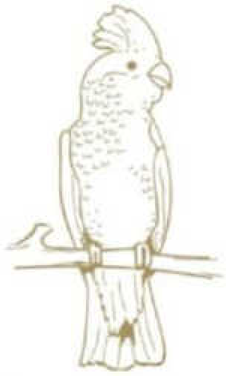
The story of the two sisters – often known as the Wawilak Sisters – is told in different versions by the many Aboriginal tribes. However, the common theme in every version of the story is the depiction of a confrontation between opponents of opposite sexes. The primal sisters represent female wisdom – they are praised as accomplished hunters and they have the power to give form to the land. When the Rainbow Snake swallows them, he gains some of their wisdom in the process. Since that time, it has always been the male members of the tribe who look after the traditions of tribal wisdom and lore, and hand them down from one generation to the next.



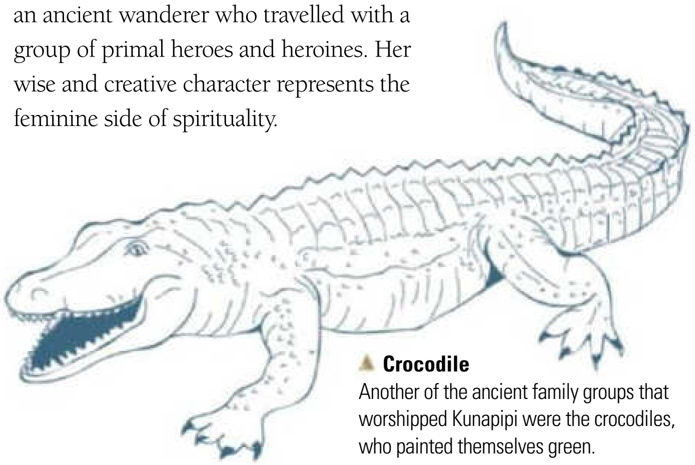
▶ **Tribal representations**
The sisters are often depicted in carvings used during rituals. The younger sister (on the right) wears a girdle across her chest to strengthen her breasts since she has just given birth.

KUNAPIPI

Certain versions of the story depict the Earth Mother Kunapipi as the mother of the Wawilak sisters. She is also sometimes considered to be an eternal "Old Woman" figure, and the female counterpart to the male Rainbow Snake. Other myths describe her as the creator of men, women, and the animals of the world. Kunapipi asked her followers to paint themselves to show allegiance to specific families or groups. She is also believed by some to have been an ancient wanderer who travelled with a group of primal heroes and heroines. Her wise and creative character represents the feminine side of spirituality.



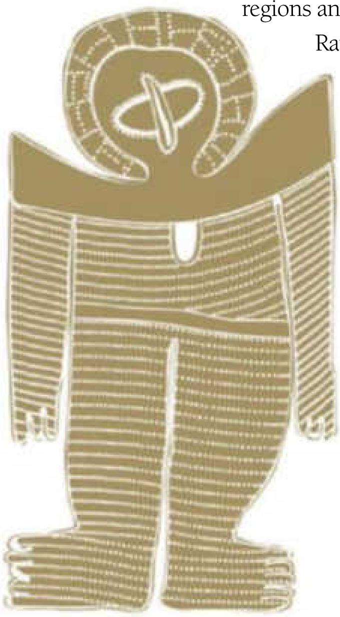
▲ **Galah parrot**
The Galah parrots painted themselves in a ritual as per Kunapipi's instructions.



▲ **Crocodile**
Another of the ancient family groups that worshipped Kunapipi were the crocodiles, who painted themselves green.

ABORIGINAL DEITIES

There are thousands of deities in Aboriginal mythology, and the common feature among them is that they are thought to be closely connected to the land they cross and bring into existence; this is clearly illustrated in the myths of the Wawilak sisters. Many of the deities are shape-changers, who may take the form of an animal, but can, at the same time, be the ancestors of a human tribe or family. Most are specific to certain regions and rooted in the land, but some, such as the Rainbow Snake, are known all over Australia.



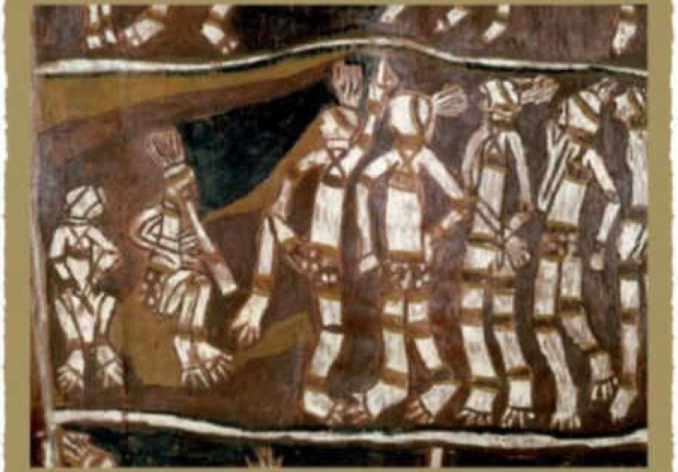
◀ **Wandjina**
The Wandjina are spirits that control fertility and the natural elements. They are depicted with white stripes on their bodies, representing falling rain.

▼ **Sun deities**
According to one myth, the sun is a torch carried across the sky each day by the solar goddess Gnowee, who is looking for her lost son.

RITUALS AND CELEBRATIONS

Aboriginal rituals are performed on many occasions, from the celebration of a birth to the burial of the dead. Other ceremonies – attended by the whole tribe – can retell in song and dance the stories of the spirits of Dreamtime.

A few rituals are thought to have been first performed by the primal sisters to keep the Rainbow Snake at bay. The rituals show how all of creation is linked together by the ancestors.



Painting of an Aboriginal ceremony

TANGAROA

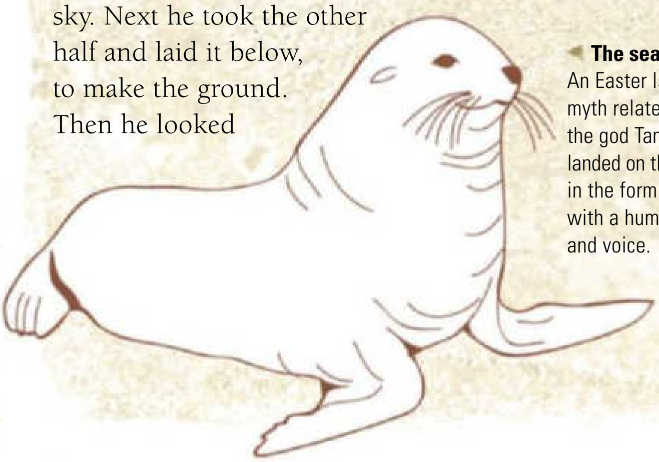
One of the most prominent deities of the Pacific islands is Tangaroa (also known as Ta'aroa or Tagaroa). He is considered to be a sea god in some places, but in Tahiti and among the other island communities, including Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu, Tangaroa is known as the creator of the cosmos and all its inhabitants. Some people believe that he was the son of the primal deities Rangi and Papa, but another version of the myth says that he created the universe after tearing apart the two halves of a great shell when emerging from it.

THE MYTH

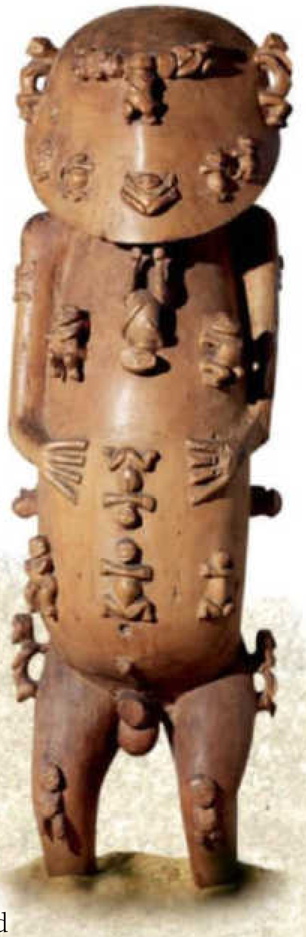
Long before the world was made, and before even the gods came to control the universe, nothing existed except an endless void, floating within which was a great shell. This was called Rumia, and was shaped like an egg. There was darkness everywhere and nothing could be seen, not even the solitary floating shell. But inside the shell, something was stirring. It was Tangaroa, the creator. He had no father or mother, and no other gods lived with him in the shell. He had brought himself to life and was biding his time before bringing the world into being.

THE SKY AND THE EARTH

At last, Tangaroa began to move. Pushing against the inside of the shell, he heaved until the walls of the shell broke in two. Upon emerging, Tangaroa shouted, "Is there anyone there?" But there was no reply – all around him was only darkness and silence. Subsequently, Tangaroa set about the task of creation. First he took one half of the broken shell and lifted it up to make the great arch of the sky. Next he took the other half and laid it below, to make the ground. Then he looked around and saw that nothing else but his body was left to be used for the task of creation. So Tangaroa took his own flesh and made the soil on the ground. The god made use of his backbone to create a mountain range and from his inner organs he made the clouds in the sky. Tangaroa even used the nails of his fingers and toes to give shells and scales to the creatures in the sea.



The seal deity An Easter Island myth relates how the god Tangaroa landed on the island in the form of a seal with a human face and voice.



The sea god Since Tangaroa created the other gods from his own body, he is frequently depicted giving birth to the gods who crawl over his body.

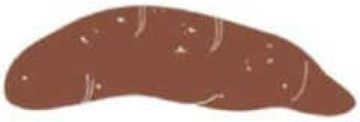
POPULATING THE EARTH

Then Tangaroa called forth the other gods from within him. They began to emerge, and one in particular – the craftsman god Tu – helped Tangaroa continue the process of creation. The pair worked together to make the trees and animals that populated the Earth. Then they made the first humans, who were called Til and Hina, and persuaded them to approach one another to procreate.

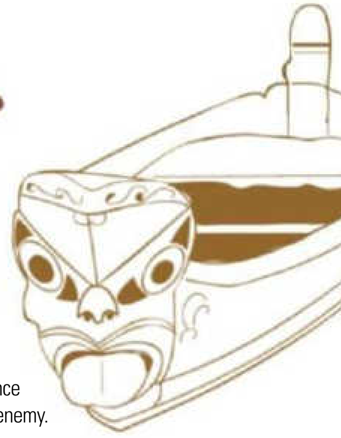
Tangaroa saw that everything he had created had a shell, just as he had had one in the beginning. The sky was the shell that contained the sun, the moon, and the stars. The Earth too was a shell; it was an enormous container for all the rocks, rivers and lakes, and for the plants that grew on its surface and the animals that walked on it. Even human beings had their shells; the wombs of women were the shells from which new life was born.

TANGAROA IN NEW ZEALAND

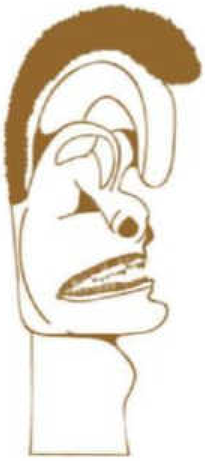
In New Zealand, Tangaroa is the Maori god of the sea and the son of the primal deities Papa (the goddess of the Earth) and Rangi (the god of the sky). At the beginning of time, Papa and Rangi held each other tight, locking their children within their embrace, but Tangaroa and some of his siblings wrenched them apart to initiate the process of creation. This angered his brother Tawhirimatea, the wind god, who unleashed fierce storms on them. Terrified, some of Tangaroa's descendants hid in the forest. Tangaroa quarrelled with his brother Tane, the god of forests, for having given shelter to the runaway creatures. He attacked Tane's land with his tides and swept away all the creatures into his watery realm.

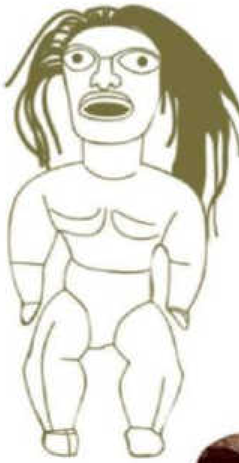


▲ **Yam**
Certain nights of the lunar month were named after Tangaroa. It was believed that the yams planted on these "Tangaroa nights" would produce the best roots.



► **Maori canoe**
The people of the forest made offerings to Tangaroa before setting out in their canoes, since they were entering the realm of Tane's mortal enemy.





◄ **Pele**
The goddess of the volcano, Pele was believed to have created the entire Hawaiian archipelago, but her scorching lava also made her a deity of destruction, who would erupt whenever someone broke a taboo.

▲ **Kukailimoku**
The consort of Hina, and a form of the god Ku (also know as Tu), Kukailimoku was the god of war, woodlands, and crops. He was widely worshipped by craftsmen in Hawaii.

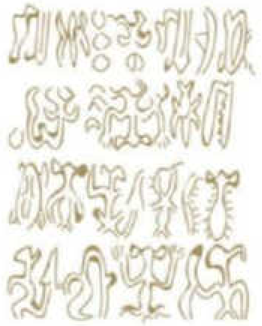
► **Papatuanuku**
Mother Earth, or Papatuanuku, was the female half of the primal couple. When she raised her arm during her long embrace with her husband, Rangi, she gave her children their first glimpse of sunlight.

POLYNESIAN DEITIES

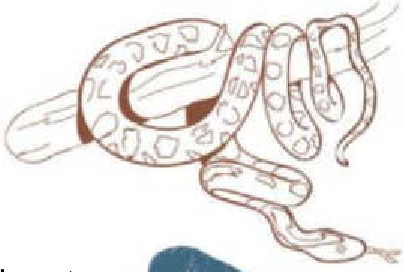
Tangaroa is one of the oldest Polynesian deities, and in some myths, the primary god. Many of the Polynesian deities were worshipped as sky gods, whose forces were unleashed in the form of storms or hurricanes, as in the case of the wind god Tawhirimatea. According to some myths, Tangaroa's son Maui slowed down the sun by lassoing it, and forced it to shine for longer periods in summer. The goddess Hina controlled the tides, and in some versions, was also the goddess of the west wind. There were many powerful Earth deities too, such as the volcano goddess Pele, who was dominant in Hawaii. Other deities included the mother goddess, known variously as Papatuanuku, or Papa, who was present at the beginning of creation.

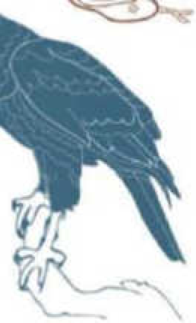
OTHER POLYNESIAN CREATION MYTHS

Several creation stories told in the Pacific islands feature Maui, who created the islands of Polynesia by fishing them up from the bottom of the sea using a great fish-hook. Some creation myths centre on a primal goddess in the Underworld who plucked the first gods and humans from her own body. Others describe a series of sexual unions, beginning with the coupling of light and dark, which engendered everything in the cosmos. Still other stories describe how the islands were formed from the discarded wood chips of the carpenter son of the sky god Tagaloa. However, most myths regard Tangaroa as the creator deity and patron of sailors.



▲ **Rongorongo tablets**
The mysterious hieroglyphic inscriptions on the wooden tablets discovered at Easter Island may record an as yet unknown creation myth.





► **The creators**
In a Fijian myth, the first humans were a boy and girl, the abandoned children of the hawk Turukawa. The snake god Degei brought them up and they came together to create the human race.

> O TANGAROA IN THE IMMENSITY OF SPACE, CLEAR AWAY THE CLOUDS BY DAY.
>
> Dennis Kawaharada, *1992 Voyage: Sail to Rarotonga*, 1992

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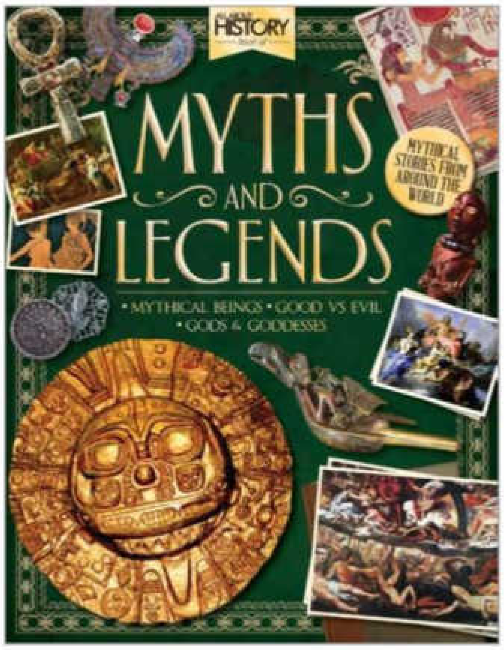
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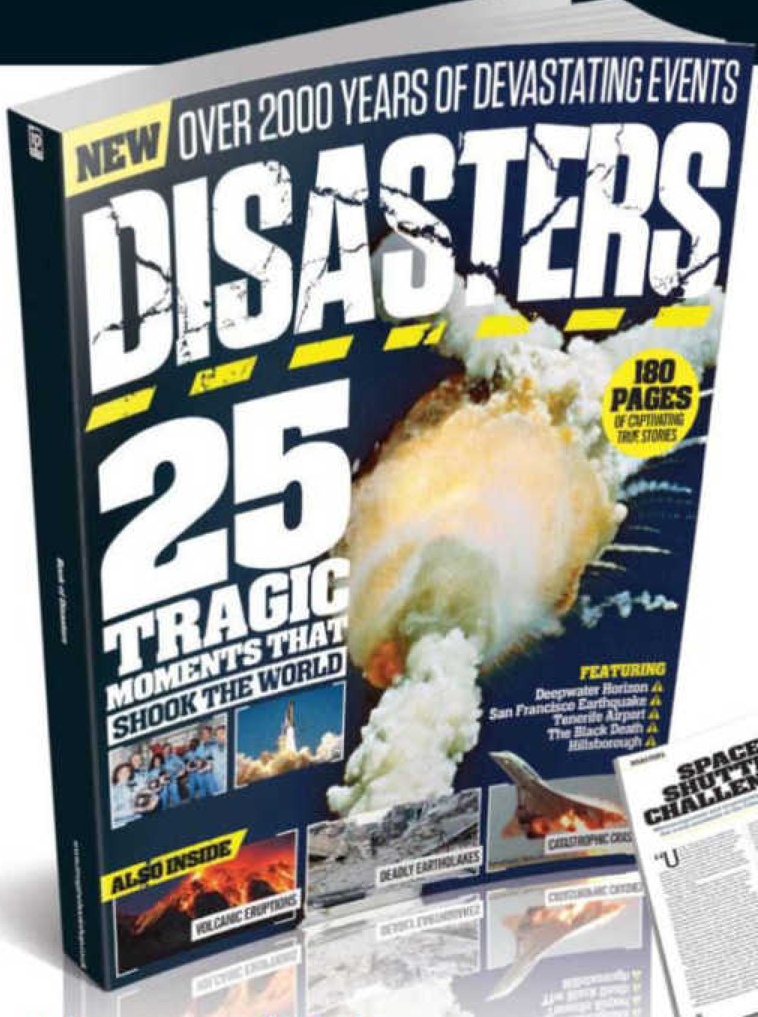
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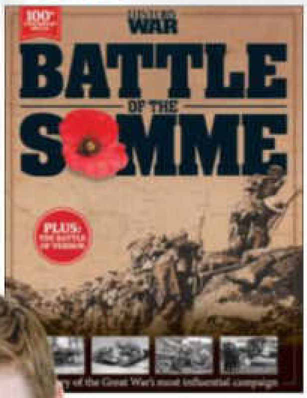
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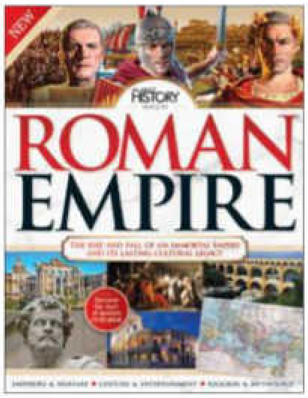
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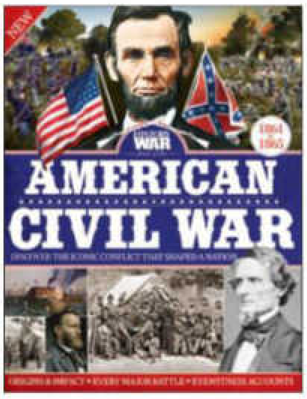
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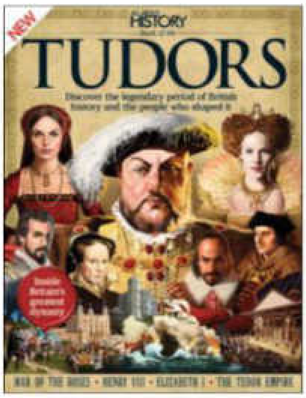
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